



04 夢燃える楽園

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ムシウタ

M U S H I - U T A





ムシウタ

MU SHI- UTA

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Chiharu

Azusa

ねえ、キミはあたしが誰かを知ってるんじゃない？



Reiji

その傷で……
ぎんごころ……まきごころなる……？

Kanata

0.00 Owl/ The Last

.....Jeez, how irksome.

Owl/ thought as she woke up curled up on the bed.

Her body shuddered with a *brrr*.

Although the temperature was getting warmer, it was still cold early in the morning.

“.....”

Getting off the bed, Owl/ immediately moved towards the chair by the window. It was a chair with a classical design made out of a twisted wood.

A worn-out bed.

The chair by the window.

An old model 14-inch television.

Those were all that was provided to Owl/ in her room. She had not requested for anything else, nor did she find the need for anything else.

Looks like there's no change today either—.

Owl/ looked out of the window without much thought, confirming the lack of any irregularity. This was something she had never failed to do every day for the past five years.

The scenery outside of the window had not changed a single bit despite all these years.

Whether it is the column of houses lined up neatly, to the narrow sidewalk on which people are jogging. To be more exact, there was a certain change, that being the colour of the trees lining the sidewalk. Right now, the young leaves were flourishing, painting a lush green view.

Owl/'s thinly opened eyes looked straight at a particular house.

That house belonged to Ayukawa Chiharu, the target of observation of her

mission.

“.....”

She curled up on the chair, maintaining her view on Ayukawa Chiharu's house.

Owl did not have any doubts about her mission.

For the nameless her who barely scraped a living in the dirty back alley, it was because of this mission that *she* bestowed a name and power upon her. That *person*—*Ouru*, had granted upon her the same name, *Owl*. This name was her greatest pride and joy. Apart from this, she had nothing else.

Ouru-sama, there are no abnormalities today as well—.

She reported to her master in her heart whom she had not seen in a while. Obviously, she did not receive a response.

If *Owl* did not fulfil the mission given to her, she would be abandoned by *Ouru*. And then, her master, *Ouru*, would also be erased by the organisation. *Ouru* had mentioned that that organisation was known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Although she did not know what the organisation does, the only thing she knew for sure was that they were a group that wield enormous power.

Her master mentioned to her that the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau was a governmental body established to capture and restrain *Mushitsuki*, people that were infested with the *Mushi*, outlandish monsters whose existence was publicly denied by the government.

The *Mushi* infests young boys and girls, feeding on their hopes and dreams. In return for consuming their host's dreams, they bestow mysterious powers upon their host, devouring their dreams till the day they die. Also, *Mushitsuki* whose *Mushi* were killed turns into a corpse-like existence which lacks emotions. *Owl* had never thought deeply about these facts before and merely accepted them. Her master, *Ouru*, was a *Mushitsuki* as well.

She could remember the words of her master, *Ouru*, word for word, but she could never fully understand the meaning behind them. This made her felt deeply that she was not as clever as her master. Even so, the current her could

not be compared to the her five years ago when she could not even think for herself.

Looking away from the window, she used the remote control lying by her feet to switch on the television.

With a *putsun*, the early morning news appeared on the screen.

The news caster was reporting in a lively voice.

Owl/ once again returned her sight to beyond the window.

“.....”

She monitored the house of Ayukawa Chiharu while curled up in the chair.

In the motionless room, only the voice of the news caster sounded.

For five years.

Owl/ had repeated the same actions all the time.

—She had not been told the reason for the monitoring of Ayukawa Chiharu.

Eventually, Owl/ slowly got up from the chair.

She headed towards the kitchen and stopped in front of the refrigerator.

Owl/ opened the refrigerator and took out a pack of milk by the door, finishing it in a few gulps. This constituted the entirety of her breakfast.

Closing the refrigerator and taking a breath, Owl/ headed down the doorway to go out. The unit given her belonged to a worn down two-storeys apartment. She had already realised from the lack of human presence that there were nobody living in the units next to her.

As there was no elevator, she descended down the stairs rhythmically. However, one would not have been able to hear her footsteps at all. From her past experience living in the back alley of streets, she had long since mastered the art of killing her presence.

Before she entered the sidewalk, she saw the Ayukawa house behind a wall.

.....She's late.

At the same time as Owl/ narrowed her eyes, the entrance opened forcefully.

It felt as if someone had kicked the door open from the other side.

“Why..... jeez! You should have told me that the clock stopped!”

The figure of a flustered girl appeared.

Her hair which was usually beautifully straightened was slightly dishevelled this morning. On her bangs was the usual sky-blue hairpin, her favourite throughout these five years. The corner of her eyes which slanted downwards most of the time were pointing up currently due to her annoyance. She was dressed in the uniform of Nishito Sousei High School.

Ayukawa Chiharu, 17 years-old.

Ever since her mother remarried five years ago to her current husband, the three of them has been living together. Their relationship seemed to be good, seeing as the occasional chatter in front of the house were all smiles.

Her conduct was very proper. She always left home on time and usually returned by evening, occasionally coming home late.

To the best of her knowledge, unlike her master *Ouru*, Chiharu—not a Mushitsuki.

She was a vastly ordinary girl, one you could find on the streets anywhere.

Chiharu tried to open the fence, only to grasp thin air. Because of her flustered motions, her knee ended up knocking into the metallic fence.

“Ou.....!”

Owl laughed with a *kuhuu* and a smile of ridicule formed on her face. —*Ouru* had mentioned before that her way of laughing was slightly creepy, but that she should not change as that was what made her unique.

What a clumsy girl—.

“Ouch.....”

With tears forming in her eyes, Chiharu finally left the house.

Hiding in the shadow of the wall, *Owl* entered the street. Silencing her footstep, she shadowed Chiharu at a constant distance.

Slipping in between passers-by, *Owl* could feel a group of middle school girls

turning their heads.

“Hey, look at her. So cute.....”

“It’s so pretty.”

Owl clicked her tongue with a *tch*. The group of girls were looking directly at her.

Owl disliked her external appearance. No matter how she hid her presence, she would draw attention because of her looks. If the target of her shadowing was any sharper, she would have failed in her mission.

Thinking about such things, a smile of contempt formed on *Owl*’s lips.

Well, it would be impossible for someone like Chiharu to spot me anyway—.

To be blunt, Ayukawa Chiharu was duller than the average person. Anyhow, in these five years, she never displayed any signs of noticing the existence of *Owl* who was monitoring her. It was truly a needless worry.

It was right when Chiharu tried to cross the pedestrian crossing in a half-run.

A semi-trailer that hurtled on despite the red light came into *Owl*’s view. The eyes of the person in the driver’s seat remained closed even now, it appears that he had fallen asleep. Also, no one else seemed to have realised this transgression apart from *Owl*.

If she does nothing at this rate, Chiharu as well as the other pedestrians would be run over by the trailer.

What to do.....?

In that instance, *Owl*’s thoughts spun.

—When was it that she started to bear a certain sentiment towards Ayukawa Chiharu?

Hatred.

Owl, who usually monitored Chiharu with a cool head, could presently feel hatred swirling violently in her chest.

It seems that five years had been too long a period.

She had observed Ayukawa Chiharu spending her days peacefully, crying, laughing and growing up. She spent her youth in a manner befitting that of her age.

And yet, for some reason—*Owl* had to follow that girl around in the shadows every day. And once she returned to her apartment, she would cycle 1-hour naps between her bed and the chair by the window.

She had been repeating these action since forever. Every day, day after days. Just because of this one mission, to monitor the girl known as Ayukawa Chiharu, *Owl* had thrown away her life.

Above all, to fulfil this mission, she had to be separated from her master, *Ouru*.

I've had enough of this.....!

Owl's hatred reared its head.

If Chiharu died, I would be able to say goodbye to this kind of lifestyle. I would be able to return to *Ouru's* side, she who had given me my power and name.

As *Owl* watched, the truck ploughed onwards to the pedestrian crossing. The pedestrians who started to notice the out-of-control vehicle began to cry out.

Chiharu too started to comprehend the situation. She stiffened upon seeing the rampant vehicle.

“.....!”

Shit.....!

Cursing in her heart, *Owl* kicked off the ground. Rushing to the side of the road, she strongly kicked a small pebble flying.

The flying pebble flew into the open window by the driver's seat, hitting the snoozing driver squarely in his temple.

The driver woke up with a start, his eyes fully opening. He frantically jerked the steering wheel, causing the vehicle to head straight towards a tree by the roadside. A thunderous roar sounded when the truck collided with the large tree.

Owl snorted with a *humph* and hid her body behind the shadow of a tree. Chiharu should not be able to see her with the truck in her way.

A commotion broke out at the pedestrian crossing.

Chiharu let out a sigh of relief before recalling that she was going to be late and started running again. Turning her head behind multiple times, she made her way to school.

Owl continued her stalking as if nothing had happened.

I can't let an accident happen—.

She directed a sharp gaze at Chiharu's back.

In addition to her mission to monitor Ayukawa Chiharu, *Owl* received another order from *Ouru*.

If she were to notice any suspicious activity, she is supposed to report back to her immediately. In that case, there may be a need for *Ouru* to handle it herself.

That was the order that *Owl* received.

Owl grinded her teeth with a *giri*, quelling the hatred she had for the girl.

It was part of *Owl*'s mission to protect Chiharu from any unforeseen dangers as well. If she wanted this meaningless lifestyle to end, that would require Chiharu herself to present some sort of 'dangerous' action. Indeed, in that case, her master, *Ouru*—and the SEPB would inevitably deem her as a target to eliminate.....

By now, *Owl*'s objective had already changed from observing Chiharu, to finding an excuse to kill her.

Having reached the school, *Owl* watched as Chiharu passed through the school gates.

She herself walked past the school gates and headed for the back of the school compound instead.

At the back of the school building, *Owl* entered the school compound through a hole in the wire mesh. After hearing the chime and confirming that all the students had assembled inside their classrooms, she entered an empty hallway

from the window.

Keeping up her guard, *Owl* erased the sound of her footsteps and rushed up the staircase in one breath. As she lacked the key to the door leading to the rooftop, she stepped out of a window on the opposite side. She grabbed the rain gutter and kicked off the wall, landing softly on the rooftop.

Owl crept along the rooftop with practised movements, keeping her waist low to avoid being spotted.

There she is.

Owl spotted Chiharu in the opposite school building as she was in the midst of short homeroom. Although the teacher was speaking, Chiharu was talking to her classmate sitting behind her. She was probably sharing about how she narrowly avoided the accident that happened earlier.

“.....”

Owl adjusted her position such that Chiharu would not be able to see her and curled up, observing her motionlessly.

Through her mission observing Chiharu day and night, *Owl* learned to cut off her thoughts. Without thinking of anything, she just observed. If she did not do so, she felt that she would probably go crazy at the sluggish passage of time.

Today too, there wasn't any incident (regrettably) and Chiharu ended school as usual. After completing her work as a member of the Student Council, Chiharu bade farewell to her friends by the school gates.

“.....?”

Owl creased her eyebrows.

Contrary to her belief that Chiharu would head home straight, Chiharu went in a different direction.

An ill-fitting smile lit up on *Owl's* face as she let out a *kuhuu*.

That's it..... once you do something that can be concluded as dangerous, I'll report to *Ouru-sama* straight away.....!

However, her 'expectations' were betrayed right after.

Ayukawa Chiharu had simply headed for the city centre of Nishito City and just looked around in a clothes shop.

Chiharu wasn't doing anything suspicious, she was just shopping. This caused *Owl's* spirit to fall.

Then, Chiharu approached a large department store. Situated at a plaza right in front of the station, Chiharu was considering whether to enter it or not.

There was a large electronic display on the wall of the department store.

Owl stood on the spot reflexively, looking up at the display. Multiple movie trailers played one after another on the screen.

Lost in her thoughts, she just stared at the screen.

The video seemed to suck her in with its continually shifting imaginary sceneries.

At one moment, it showed an exciting car chase in another country, and then in the next, a fantasy story in another world..... Looking at the various scenes, a single emotion filled *Owl's* heart.

Perhaps, it could be called 'yearning'?

Images of a world much unlike her own flickered in the rectangular panels.

Now that she thought about it, it was right at this place. It was here where she had met *Ouru*.

That day still seemed just like a dream to *Owl*.

The young *Owl* was sitting on a bench in the plaza in front of the Nishito City station.

Her sight was enraptured by the view in front of her.

In the large display installed on the recently built department store, a scene that was so beautiful it seemed out of the world was projected.

To her, that dirty bench had transformed into her very own special seat. Apart from her, none of those passers-by would even think of approaching that bench, which made it all the more her sacred spot.

To prevent others from snatching the bench from her, *Owl* had purposely

dirtied the bench at that time. Pedestrians that spared a second look at the dirty-looking her were few, and even those that did would only have a look of disgust on their faces.

Frankly, *Owl* could even barely remember when that started. By the time she had become aware, she was already living a life where her bed was a pile of garbage stacked together in the dirty back alley, with no parents nor siblings.

Moreover, nothing threatens her when she is on the bench. Most people would avoid her, while occasionally, other vagrants would spare her some food.

However, it was on that day that the bench turned into an irreplaceable treasure to *Owl*.

Above her, an incredibly beautiful scene expanded from the panels.

A view of the ocean which she had never seen before appeared, followed by the scene of a rocket heading to space, then to that of a couple hugging and kissing—.

It was the first time that *Owl*, who had only ever seen the dirty floor of the back alley, had looked upwards. Every time the image changed, her heart pounded with excitement.

Even though she thought the scenes were cliched..... she was moved nonetheless.

Without even any strength left to obtain food, she brought her weakened body to that location. She had already decided that there would be her place of passing.

“.....*Kuhuu.*”

Before *Owl* realised, a streak of tears flowed down her cheeks.

She laughed for the first time in her life.

That was a small miracle.

For *Owl* who had collapse onto the ground and would die just like that, she should not have been smiling. Because that had been her fate from since she was born.

But, perhaps..... if fate was like a gear, if there had just been a small motion, who knows if she would have been the one to appear in one of those sceneries —.

“Kuhuu..... Kuhuhu.....”

A lone girl sat down next to *Owl* as she laughed while shedding tears.

She was just a child. *Owl* still remembered clearly even now, her short cord-coloured hair held by a hairband.

“What’s with you? Are you laughing? That looks disgusting.”

Owl raised her face listlessly to look at her. The girl was pulling a wry face.

However, the girl abruptly caressed *Owl*’s face. —Feeling the touch of a living thing apart from herself for the first time, *Owl* drew back.

“You’re shaking.”

Behind the grinning girl, a deep crimson smoke-like object appeared. The smoke seemed alive, moving around to form a large body and long antennas, with a pair of beautiful shiny wings solidifying in the end.

It looked like a bee—no, it exuded a sense of exalted pride, more like that of a queen bee.

“People like me are known as Mushitsuki. How about that? Aren’t I revolting as well?”

Owl lightly nodded.

Although that was simply because she did not have the strength to move her head any more than that, when the girl saw that, she was shocked. And then, she laughed out loud seemingly with joy that came from deep within her heart.

“*Ahaha!* What’s with you? Even someone like you understand what I’m saying? That’s weird, jeez..... Fine, I shall make you my very first servant. It wouldn’t be bad to have you help out for SEP’s mission.”

The girl said so with a grin. It was a cute and refreshing smile that was irrelevant to the contents and tone of her words.

“How about we trudge onwards together along this shitty life!”

It was as if she had reached the summit of the world—no, the two of them were undoubtedly kings of the narrow bench.

From that day onwards, *Owl* became that girl's servant, pawn and partner.

That was what happened five years ago.

“.....”

Owl looked away from the huge panels and resumed tailing Ayukawa Chiharu.

If only she died—if only *Ouru-sama* killed her, then I would be able to reunite with *Ouru-sama*.....

Completely oblivious to the killing intent emanating from *Owl* who stalked her from behind at a fixed distance, Chiharu was enjoying her window shopping.

Her gaze fixed on Chiharu, *Owl* felt an inexplicable sense of déjà vu.

Like as if..... she was looking at the protagonist of a movie.

The figure of Chiharu basking under the sun as if celebrating her youth seemed to be cut right out of the scenery of the huge panel which *Owl* was attracted to. If Chiharu was the protagonist, then wouldn't *Owl* that was presently stalking her be an assassin. The suspense would only be second-rate at best.

However, if perchance..... there were such things as reincarnation, then maybe *Owl* could be a protagonist like Chiharu—.

“.....*Kuhuu*.”

At the impossibly ridiculous delusion, she unconsciously laughed out loud.

Even so, the delusion continued indifferently.

If this was a movie, what kind of story would it become? Narr*Ow*ly avoiding the blade of the assassin, leading to the growth of the girl who is protagonist? Or alternatively, would it lead a tragedy where the girl was easily killed? Or maybe, it may lead to love blossoming between the assassin and the protagonist, with the two of them joining hands and making up—.

“*Kuhuhuu*.....”

Even as she was absorbed in her delusions, *Owl* never forgot about her

reality.

These delusions that she was having were nothing but fleeting figments of her imagination. *Owl* had definitely never led a life like that of the protagonist of a movie. She did not belong in the light of the day.

But, what about Chiharu.....?

If Chiharu was the protagonist of this story, would *Owl* be considered as one of the central characters of the story? Would *Owl* be able to see this story till its end?

In the midst of her whimsical imagination, *Owl* saw Chiharu's movements change in front of her.

".....?"

She had suddenly stopped in the middle of the street and looked in a different direction. *Owl* tried to follow the direction of her gaze but was blocked by a wall of hustling pedestrians and could not see what Chiharu was looking at.

Chiharu turned around and started to run in a half-jog towards the opposite direction.

What is it.....? Did she saw an acquaintance?

Owl silenced her footsteps and discreetly narrowed the distance between her and Chiharu.

Chiharu crossed the pedestrian crossing while staring at something, looking like that of a child chasing after a butterfly. She headed with a tottering gait in a direction completely opposite that of her home and school.

The place she was headed to was halfway between the station and the prefectural office, a location right in the centre of Nishito City.

Chiharu looked around her surroundings restlessly before passing under a rope that surrounded the area.

"....."

Owl looked up at a large building that towered far above her.

It was a colossal tower that reflected the sunlight that fell on it, causing it to

glitter and sparkle, making it hard to tell whether the surface was transparent or white, or perhaps silver. Next to the tower was a dome-shaped building, as well as various other buildings that surrounded the tower. All of the buildings were wrapped in a silver light, giving off an impression of a gigantic jewellery box. The tower resembled a crystal and the dome a diamond, inlaid in the surrounding buildings seemingly made of platinum or silver.

The Nishito City Mega City Project, 'URBAN'.

In addition to food, clothing and accommodation facilities, there were also entertainment and work sectors all combined into an area as an undertaking by the government. The tower in the centre is home to businesses and corporations as well as recreation facilities, the dome being an institution of education and arts while the surrounding buildings were places of residence. During the final stages of construction where only work on the interior remained, collusion between the project supervisor and construction company came into light which caused the construction work to come to a stop—or so *Owl* was told by Sugitsu Aya, who similar to her, was a pawn under Chami.

“.....”

Chiharu was headed towards the dome-shaped building—commonly known as 'Urban Dome'. Entry to the premises was obviously barred to outsiders, but Chiharu herself did not seem to care about that.

Owl's heart throbbed faster in excitement.

“.....*Kuhuu.*”

She revealed a twitching smile and unconsciously swallowed a gulp.

F-finally, it's time.....?

Up till now, Chiharu had not displayed any actions worthy of suspicion. But now, a feeling of nervousness of do something 'up to no good' emanated from Chiharu's back.

Is today the day.....? Is the reason for the monitoring of that girl finally going to be revealed today?

“*Kuhuhuu.....!*”

Owl followed Chiharu with light footsteps. She could feel her own emotions being uplifted.

Ouru-sama! It looks like she is going to do something ‘up to no good’! If I catch her doing anything deemed to be dangerous, I’ll immediately head by your side to report it to you.....!

If it was Owl’s master, she would be able to dispatch of a young lass like her in a heartbeat. This way, the overflowing hatred accumulated in Owl would be released instantaneously as well. Just imagining that result caused her cloudy heart to clear up.

Chiharu skirted around the heavy machineries and plywood planks littered on the floor and entered Urban Dome.

That’s it, keep going.....! Today shall be your death anniversary! That’s right, this is where your story—.

Up till there, Owl’s train of thoughts came to a sudden stop.

“.....”

Chiharu’s story comes to an end. Right here, right now.

Really?

Five years. That period of time seemed to be very distant to Owl now.

In just that interval, Chiharu had steadily matured.

At the time of her mother’s remarriage, she was a girl who hardly smiled. But, maybe it was because she had been blessed with great friend in middle school and high school. In going to school, her surrounding environment caused her personality to soften. Now, she was someone who would hum to herself with a smile during her daily life. She did not have a boyfriend currently, but it was only a matter of time before she did. More importantly, she did not have a shred of worry, indeed, she was the personification of a protagonist in a movie about youth—.

“.....!”

Owl gnashed her teeth with a *giri*, forcefully pulling herself back to reality from her reminiscence.

That doesn't matter.....! What's the point of hesitating right now!

Chiharu entered the interior of the dome and walked up the motionless escalator.

The lounge on the second floor was an atrium. Perhaps this floor was originally meant to be an indoor garden. The plants left unattended in the centre stretched out towards the lens-shaped ceiling, growing rampantly in competition for the sunlight streaming down. The fantastical scene was spread into all corners of the floor, as if somebody had cut out a portion of the jungle and placed it here.

“.....”

Looking at the spectacle, *Owl* shuddered.

Ah—.

Her body could not stop shaking and her knees felt weak. Her lips *slOwly* twisted into that of a smile, revealing the all emotions she had accumulated for the past five years.

In front of Chiharu who stood still in the jungle, an unfamiliar girl was lying facing sideways. The girl looked ephemeral as she laid on the bed of bush, as if she was a fairy.

—No, that girl was not unfamiliar, *Owl* recognised her face. It was documented in the report on the ‘level 1 top priority seizure target’ brought by Sugitsu Aya just the other day. She did not know what was the situation behind her, but anyway, there were no doubts that she was a dangerous character.

“*Ku..... Kuhuu.....*”

Owl continued to laugh in amazement as she turned to the opposite direction.

T-this is fantastic..... to think that Chiharu was in contact with such a dangerous character being pursue by the *organisation*! There's no mistakes! There are no actions more dangerous than this!

“*Kuhuhuu!*”

Feeling that even one step slower was unbearable, *Owl* dashed with all her strength. Naturally, she was headed towards her master, *Ouru's* side to report

to her her findings.

As she leapt down the escalator, she slipped and tumbled across the floor. However, even that pain felt good. A smile was still plastered on *Owl's* face as she got up from the floor.

Ouru-sama! Chiharu is a dangerous character! Come, descend upon me right now and kill her—.

“.....”

All of a sudden, the smile disappeared from *Owl's* face.

Chiharu will die here.

Right here, the curtains of the story of the girl whom *Owl* had watched over for the past five years will come to a close.

She had been dreaming of this ending all the time till now. But..... just maybe, a different ending may be possible. For example, if *Owl* chose the option of *nothing to report*, as per usual, the everyday life of Ayukawa Chiharu will—.

“*Ku..... Kuhuhuu!*”

At the absurd thought that came into her mind, a feeling that made her want to laugh welled up.

Impossible. That ending cannot be possible. The story of the girl known as Ayukawa Chiharu will indubitably end here—.

“.....”

After exiting the dome, *Owl's* feet came to a stop abruptly.

She had not been paying attention to the presence of others apart from Chiharu. That's why, when she realised there was a person standing in front of the exit, she was taken aback.

The other party too seemed to have noticed her. He absentmindedly stared at her.

“.....!”

Who the hell are you.....!

She almost yelled out loud.

The person who stood there was a tall man in a dark suit. Although he was slim, his muscular arms were revealed through tears in his sleeves which had been stretched taut. His dishevelled long hair hid his eyes, while a mask concealed his mouth from which rough breathing could be heard.

There was a pool of blood by the man's feet. It seems that he was injured. But, more importantly—.

To *Owl* who grew up in the wilderness, she could feel it clearly. Even as he stood there calmly, he was wrapped in tension that seemed to almost burst. That was—bloodlust. Not to mention, the intensity of the bloodlust was more than she had ever felt before.

“*Guh..... Haah..... Haah.....* Where is it..... it should have been around here.....”

The man raised his groaning voice as he walked in *Owl's* direction.

This man would slaughter everyone—.

She could tell that the man in front of her had lost all sense of rational thinking. In addition, there was that abnormal bloodlust. He would probably kill any person that enters his sight. Even if they were just an ordinary person..... even a girl like Chiharu.

“.....!”

Owl could feel her hair standing on its ends. All the happiness and hesitation she had felt thus far was buried under a single violent emotion.

You've got to be kidding me!

Owl howled in her heart, she was incensed.

Five years! For five years! I have always been waiting for this day! Something like this..... I won't let an unknown bastard like you steal that from me! Chiharu is mine and *Ouru-sama's* prey! You..... are you trying to usurp that from us? Don't belittle us!

Instincts overcame *Owl's* reason. With a running start, she charged upon the man.

“Muu!”

Owl’s fingertips grazed the man’s face as he dodged instantly. A laceration cut across the man’s throat, causing blood to trickle out.

“What the hell are you.....!”

Owl followed up with another strike but was completely evaded this time. In return, the man countered with his fist, driving it into her flank.

“Gufuu.....!”

Owl’s petite body was easily sent flying and she crashed into the wall. She could feel the taste of blood in her mouth, but in her rage, she got up immediately.

As *Owl* took a few small steps towards him, the man sent out a kick. However, that was merely a feint. Dodging the kick with agile movements, *Owl* jumped on the man.

“Guah!”

The man groaned loudly. The skin from his cheek till the nape of his neck was torn.

Owl clicked her tongue. The weak her only has her nimble movement and claws as weapons. In fact, she was aiming for his eyes, but he managed avoided that. On the contrary, *Owl* had her claws torn off, causing her fingertips to be assaulted by sharp pain.

“Y-you bastard.....!”

With blood running down his face, the man glared at her with a demonic expression. A red and blue string seemed to float behind his back which expanded in an instant, morphing into a two-headed monster.

It was an insect, more specifically, a monster resembling a centipede with multiple body segments. Half of its body was split open, revealing a mouthpiece with countless fangs arranged compactly. Its hundreds of legs wriggled in resemblance to centipedes, sending a chill up the spines of anybody who saw it. On its red and blue heads, a total of four compound eyes caught *Owl* in its sight.

This guy..... is the same as *Ouru-sama*, a Mushitsuki!

Owl forcefully threw herself onto the floor and rolled over. Following in her direction, the red centipede opened its jaws wide and swooped down.

Owl evaded the attack by a hair's length by tumbling to her side, and the gigantic centipede gouged a hole in the ground instead.

Breaking through the asphalt as easily as a bulldozer, the centipede penetrated through the tower—Urban Tower's wall.

“.....!”

Facing such incredible destructive power, Owl shuddered. If she was struck by such monstrous force, surely there would be nothing left of her. And then, Chiharu would face the same fate.

Owl looked at the dome. The commotion they have caused should have reached her by now. She might even come out to see what happened. If she did that—.

How can I let something like you plunder away our prey.....!

Evading another attack that continued with the blue-headed centipede's jaws, Owl escaped into within the tower through the hole gouged by the centipede. Having avoided the attack, she scratched at the centipede's compound eye with all her strength. Even though it had a solid carapace, as expected, its eyes were soft. An unpleasant sensation was transmitted to her through her fingertips.

“I'll kill you.....!”

In exchange for the man's groaning voice, her left claws were torn off as well. The man scuttled into the tower in pursuit of Owl.

“.....Kuhuu.”

Even as Owl sweated cold sweat from the pain in her fingertips, she still grinned.

That's right, follow me.....! I know it! When Mushitsuki use the power of their Mushi continuously, they get extremely fatigued! I'll make you use up all your strength here! Until you can't get any closer to Chiharu!

The inside of the tower was wrapped in silence. Supporting props were placed by the side of the wall and wooden beams and construction materials were

haphazardly littered across the floor. Shiny pipes were arranged in a corner that was meant to support a monument which would probably look beautiful if it was completed.

Exposed metal pipes could be seen along the unpaved floor. She could tell that they were meant to be water pipes. The water pipes extended to the first floor from underground.

Similar to the dome, there was an unmoving escalator in the centre of the floor. *Owl* headed for the second floor with light footsteps.

The battle with the unknown man continued for tens of times as she ascended the escalator. Avoiding the attacks by the centipede, *Owl* occasionally flung the wooden beams lying around on the floor at the man and intermittently stabbed her fingers aiming at the compound eyes.

“Huu..... Huu.....!”

As a result of her vigorous movements, her lungs were screaming. However, the man was in similar shape. His stamina was amazing for someone who had sustained injuries, but *Owl* was still slightly more well-off.

—Before she noticed, a gust of wind blew past her.

Much to her surprise, she had fought her way up the escalator till the rooftop. She looked around the surroundings in confusion. Steel bars were piled up in a corner along with an abandoned crane nearby.

“Haah! Haah!”

After a short delay, the man reached the rooftop as well.

Owl’s face fell. —Just a bit more and it seems like he would run out of endurance and willpower, but alas, she was just one step short. If only the tower was just a few floors taller, she lamented.

Desperately looking for a chance to reverse her fate, what caught her eye was a row of drum cans. *Owl*’s nose could pick up an irritating odour coming from it. At the same time as she realised what was in it, a certain plan sprang into her mind.

“Kuu..... Huhuu.”

A smile naturally spilled out.

Perhaps this was the wisdom that she had gained from *Ouru*. This plan she had thought up, if her master, *Ouru*, had known, would surely have said this about it:

—That, is definitely a screwed-up plan.

“*Kuhuu.*”

Precisely. It was nothing but a suicide plan.

However, *Owl*’s body had already moved into plan unhesitatingly. She sprinted for the drum cans.

“I won’t let you escape!”

The centipede which the man commanded assaulted *Owl*. *Owl* who twisted her body narrowly was sent flying along with the row of drum cans.

“.....!”

Her flank seemed to have been grazed by the fangs, causing blood to spurt out.

But right after, an intense irritating odour permeated the surroundings.

“This is..... gasoline? Was it fuel for the crane? It can’t be, you purposely.....! No, if you do that—”

The man seemed to be shaken.

“*Kuhuu.....*”

Owl stood up on wobbly legs and rushed towards the steel bars. She held up her broken claws and was about to scratch the steel bar.

“*U..... Uwooooh!*”

Perhaps he sensed the ensuing terror, the man reflexively ordered the blue centipede to chase after *Owl*. Right before *Owl*’s claws could scratch the steel bar, a large jaw bit into her body.

“.....!”

Owl opened her mouth wide and let out a loud scream of pain. With an

unpleasant sound of ribs cracking, she was thrown onto the ground like rubbish.

“Y-you..... what the heck were you trying to pull! Don’t tell me you actually wanted to light up the gasoline with a spark? **Are you trying to burn the two of us to death together!**”

“.....*Kuhuu. Kuhuhuu.*”

Laughter came out of the gasoline-soaked *Owl* as she was collapsed on the ground. It was definitely a fatal wound, there was no saving her.

“Y-you are still laughing.....? W-what is it, you bastard.....! Just what the hell!”

That’s my line—.

With a smile, *Owl* got up again.

It won’t be you..... the one who will end Chiharu’s story..... it can’t be anybody other than *Ouru-sama*!

Owl kicked off the ground. Her target was the concrete hut a short distance away. She had an intuition that there was a pump in that room. Similar to the one in Chiharu’s school, there was a pump on the floor connected to the water pipes that could be found everywhere in the tower and the dome. The next plan that came into *Owl*’s mind brought no benefits to herself at all. But—.

Ouru-sama..... as long he is in this city, he would surely be a hindrance to you. If it’s you, surely you would be able to understand my intentions..... please, *Ouru-sama*—.

“How are you still able to move with those wounds..... *U-uwaaah!*”

Completely consumed with fear, the man ordered his Mushi to crush into the hut *Owl* was in.

—The sound of destruction reverberated throughout the whole of ‘URBAN’.

After confirming that the area was completely silent, the man finally turned to his back.

“Just what the hell was that..... was that just an illusion I saw? Shit..... looks like I really need to get some rest for a while—”

Grumbling under his breath in complain, the sound of the man’s footsteps

grew further.

“.....*Kuhuu.*”

In the middle of the destroyed hut, *Owl* laughed in satisfaction.

Her abdomen was torn and her rib bones and legs were broken, even her sight was getting hazy.

It won't be you..... the one who will end Chiharu's story.....

In her blurry view, she saw a red smoke spilling out of her body along with her blood. The smoke lumped together and consolidated in the air, transforming into a bee which exuded the aura of a queen.

Ouru-sama..... I'll head towards your side right now.....

She raised her body and tried to crawl, dragging along her broken legs.

“*Kuhuu*..... *Kuhuhuu*.....”

Her broken ribs have probably pierced into her lungs. A large amount of fresh blood spilled out from her smiling lips.

The red smoke—the moment she lost the strength bestowed upon her by *Ouru*, the clear thoughts that she held till that moment left her.

But, *Ouru-sama*..... it looks like I wouldn't be able to report to you anymore, it seems that I am already—.

“*Kuhuhuu.*”

It feels like I have been seeing a shitty dream..... who knows, maybe Chiharu's story will continue on and always—.

“*Kuhuhuu, kuhuu.*”

That was *Owl*'s final thought.

“*Kuhuhuhuu, kuhuhuu*.....”

And then, the laughing voice of *Owl*, who was already incapable of thinking, propagated down Urban Tower.

0.01 The Others

At a place near the Nishito City station, a baptism of light welcomed Anmoto Shiika.

“Nn.....”

Seating in the front passenger seat of a luxury car, Shiika looked towards the source of the intense light rays.

Mesmerised by the beauty of what she saw, Shiika unconsciously held her breath.

It looked as if a gigantic crystal had grown up from the ground.

She could see the apex of the gigantic tower and dome-shaped building. The shiny silver surface had reflected the evening sun rays onto the location where Shiika was at.

“Building Complex, ‘URBAN’. Due to an impasse in the midst of the project, it is an establishment that had yet to be christened.”

The middle-aged man sitting in the driver’s seat and holding onto the steering wheel, Munakata Kaiji, explained.

“‘URBAN’.....”

The car that Shiika is in was caught in the evening rush hour.

A single boy was seated in the back seat. With his hair bundled behind a headband, he was a youth of the same age as Shiika. Half-closing his long-slit eyes, he let out a big yawn.

“It’s a pity but we do not have time for a tour. We have no business in this city. Also, we need to put as much distance between us and the Central Headquarters.”

In response to Munakata’s words, the boy opened his mouth in a while.

“No, in fact it may be a good idea to stay here for a short while.”

“What do you mean, *Aijisupa*?”

“Ever since we were in Ouka City, there were people lurking around in our surroundings.”

“What was that? Why didn’t you say anything up till now—”

“Ah!”

As Shiika looked back and forth between the gigantic tower and the traffic jam, she spotted something on the street.

“E-erm..... please wait for a bit.”

Without waiting for an answer, Shiika opened the door and jumped out.

“*Muu!*”

“*Tch!*”

With Munakata’s puzzled utterance and the boy clicking his tongue at her back, she ran into the dark street.

Over there was an animal.

“.....”



“A cat, huh. Looks like it’s already on its death bed. It was probably hit by a large model car.”

The injured white cat was breathing roughly on the floor.

Blood was flowing from its stomach and it seems like its legs were broken. Its originally beautiful white coat was stained crimson by the large amount of blood it bled. The golden pupil in its thinly opened eyes were staring into the air as if seeking something.

A trail of blood continued endlessly from beyond the street. Looking at its source, the trail pointed in the direction towards ‘URBAN’.

Shiika lifted the white cat up in an embrace. Even without the boy behind her saying anything, she understood. There was no saving this cat.

“.....Kuhuu.”

Shiika widened her eyes.

“Kuhuhuu..... Kuhuu.....”

The shaking voice of the boy came from behind.

“I-it’s laughing?”

In the middle of Shiika’s arms, the white cat laughed. Although the cat seems to be gasping in suffering, its lips was twisted into a smile.

That laughter sounded as if it was a warrior who had completed some kind of big mission and was extremely proud of that fact, feeling completely satisfied.

“Kuhuu.....”

The cat’s laughter gradually got softer and softer.

The heartbeat from its small body grew weaker, signalling the eventuality that it would stop. Even as the white cat stopped breathing, it still had a smile on its face, seeming to say that it did not have any regrets.

“.....”

The voice of Munakata came from the car, saying, “It is pitiable but leave it. Regrettably, we do not have the time for mourning”.

Having witnessed the passing of a tiny life, Shiika bit her lips.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※

Konomura Chami raised her head with a *pikun*.

Looking up in the distance, a silvery tower—Urban Tower loomed tall above the surrounding buildings.

Walking along the street in her uniform, Chami saw a red smoke heading towards her direction from the tower. The smoke which had formed into the shape of a bee, was absorbed into Chami's body and disappeared.

“.....”

Chami stood still in the middle of the crowd. The lace tied around her head in replacement of an Alice band fluttered in the wind. She stared fixedly at 'URBAN' through her stylish triangular spectacles.

“*Ouru*? What's the matter.....?”

The girl walking beside her inquired in a subdued voice. A gaze filled with vigilance rather than worry peeked out from long forelocks that hid both eyes.

Chami grinned back.

“Nope, nothing in particular. Just that the amount of my pawns have decreased by one.”

“.....?”

“More importantly, can you check for me if there is a white cat inside a two kilometre radius of 'URBAN'? There's a high probability that it is injured. It's not just any stray cat though. Please narrow it down to the most beautiful one. With your ability, even this much is possible, right, *Konoha*?”

The girl called *Konoha* seemed surprised at the sudden order. But, she immediately retreated into a narrow alley and did as she was told.

The girl touched a portion of the wall of the alley, causing it to swell up. The portion gradually turned green, turning into a Mushi that blended into the wall.

It had a weird appearance of a single large compound eye sandwiched between two leaves.

The strange-looking Leaf beetle assimilated with the wall, sliding up to the rooftop. Stopping at a spot with a good view, the large compound eye gazed over the cityscape.

A few minutes passed before *Konoha* started to speak.

“I found it.....”

“That was long. Were you taking your own sweet time?”

“.....It’s nearby. Despite being covered in injuries, it seemed to have walked a distance from ‘URBAN’, but..... it has already died.....”

“I already knew that. Show me the way.”

The place that *Konoha* led them to was a sidewalk along the main street.

Chami looked down at the white cat that had taken its last breath in the corner of the alley. A red ribbon tied in a butterfly knot was placed next to the cat in replacement of flowers. It appears that somebody had looked over the cat during its last moments. An out of character emotion welled up in her as she thought, ‘Well, I thank you for that’.

“.....”

One of her pawn—indeed, she was just one of Chami’s servant, simply one for which existed for her use. Moreover, it was merely the result of an experiment when Chami used her power for the first time.

She gently stroked the smiling white cat with her fingertips.

Doesn’t seem like an injury that was caused by an accident..... a large animal, or perhaps a Mushi got her. If it was a Mushi, it must be a minion type which attacks directly. Looks like I must confirm what happened onsite at ‘URBAN’. Good grief, this is going to be troublesome.

In her mind, she considered how to move from now onwards. But, this unmistakably means—.

“It seems that something has happened around Ayukawa Chiharu. Although

nothing happened these five years, what a truly shitty timing it is for something to occur now.”

Ignoring *Konoha* who was standing in puzzlement, she stood up.

As she looked down at the figure of the cat, it seemed to overlap with the image of her as a corpse. For all she knows, that illusion may come true in the future. Chami held onto her ambitions with the knowledge that she may die at any time.

—How about we trudge onwards together along this shitty life!

Recalling the words that she muttered in the past, Chami flashed a fearless smile.

“.....Looks like you were in happiness as you died. Escaping from this shitty life all by yourself and leaving your master behind? Good grief, how audacious.....”

Chami muttered in such a soft voice that it didn’t even reached *Konoha*.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※

In the lounge on the second floor which was transformed into a jungle, Ayukawa Chiharu was wracking her brains alone by herself.

“Ah, this definitely feels good.”

Growing in the nutrient-rich soil, weeds grew thick and fluffily till knee-length height. Maybe it was because they have been sprayed with pesticides at the start, there were no pests. With abundant sunlight filtering down from the atrium ceiling, it has become a paradise for plants.

In the centre of that paradise, two girls were lying down.

One of them was Ayukawa Chiharu, belonging to class H of the second year of Nishito Sousei High School. Not caring that her long hair had fallen onto the soil, she was looking up at the ceiling while sprawled in the shape of a ‘大’. Apart from having a tall stature amongst her class’s girls, and being the Vice-chairman of the Student Council, she was just a normal highschool girl with no

outstanding traits. Or so, that was what she thought about herself.

“Anyway, relatively speaking, that doesn’t matter at all.”

She rolled her body, turning over to stare at the sleeping girl’s face.

“The question here is, who are you? Intrigued by that weird attire and unsteady footsteps, I just unintentionally ended up following you.”

Chiharu stared at the girl lying on her side sleeping peacefully, watching her light breathing. Her hair, which was even longer than Chiharu’s, was scattered radially on the grass. Even Chiharu, who was of the same gender as her, felt that she was a beauty, although her age seemed to around that of Chiharu if not lower.

The girl was dressed in a simple in-patient garb from the hospital. Adding on the fact that one would not usually walk around the streets in such outfit, Chiharu now realised that she must have been in some trouble. There was a red stain on the hem of her outfit.

“Don’t tell me this blood belongs to her? *Aha, ahaha.....*”

Unaffected by Chiharu convulsing laugh, the girl continued to sleep with an innocent look.

“Perhaps, she is an assassin belonging to some secret organisation? Or maybe she is a fugitive at large? No, she does not have that bloody impression. Could she be the princess of a country somewhere in the midst of an escape? If that were so, then could this be the start of a great love story. In that case, was it alright for a girl like me to have found her?”

Resting her cheeks in her hands, Chiharu let her imagination run wild. She would not have been able to find the answer even if she did so, but a smile grew on her face as she thought. —She could hear some sort of noise coming from outside since a while ago, but since it stopped right after, she did not see the need to find out what happened for herself. For some reason, she felt that it was a pity to leave the girl’s side.

When she lightly poked the girl’s cheek, her eyebrows slightly knitted.

“Hey, who are you?”

In response to Chiharu's enquiry, all she received was a light sneeze from the girl.

1.00 Chiharu Part 1

Dispensing with the preliminaries, how is everything going?

For me, Ayukawa Chiharu to say, if you asked me, it appears to me that I am revelling in the festivities of youth.

After all, my family can be said to be in perfect harmony and I have lots of friends in school as well. And because I do some part-time jobs occasionally, I am not troubled financially either. Ah, but I couldn't afford the latest model mobile phone. Looks like I have to start working again.

Aah, what wonderful days. Hurray for being a highschool girl in bloom!

Incidentally, I am currently being embroiled in a situation commonplace to youths.

When you hear the word youth, I wonder what would you associate it with?

Studies?

Nightlife?

Non non, those are not it at all!

It's falling in love!

"Ayukawa? Did you not hear me?"

—Chiharu, whose consciousness had been transported into a different dimension without her realising, came to with a start.

The time now was midday.

In this season right before the spring break, lessons ended in the morning. The time now was when half of the students were heading home, and the remaining half engrossing in their club activities.

Chiharu was presently in her own classroom, class H of the second year. The figures of her classmates were not around, with only herself and another male classmate all alone in the classroom.

When she received the mail stating, ‘After school, please stay behind in the classroom’, she already had an inkling of what was going to happen. But when it came to that moment, as expected, she felt discomfited somehow.

“Ah, erm. Well.....”

Facing the male student staring at her nervously, Chiharu lowered her face with a bitter smile.

“I like you. You are not attached currently, right? In that case, please go out with me!”

‘In that case’, even if you say that—.

Chiharu’s face started to look more and more sour. This was not the first time someone had asked her out, but she could never get used to it. She would probably still feel the same no matter how many times she experienced it from now on.

“Once the new term begins, our class would be shuffled again. There’s a chance that we may be allocated to different classes..... That’s why, I want to tell you my feelings right now.”

Apparently, he was very earnest. This is bad. Chiharu was weak against the serious types.

“Well, to state the conclusion, it’s impossible. Sorry.”

Chiharu stated clearly. Because the other party was very serious, all the more that Chiharu could not answer him half-heartedly.

“Why? Do you have someone else that you like?”

“Nope. Although it is saddening, there’s not a single person I like. How unfortunate, even though falling in love is like the main event of youth.”

“T-then, all the more.....!”

“Like I said, that’s impossible. Although I don’t know if I could grow to like you, I can’t make that kind of promise. Sorry.”

Once she finished speaking, Chiharu thought in her mind, ‘Oh damn, I’ve gone and done it again’, as she held her head.

Although she had been so hesitant and wavering in her heart, her actions were frightfully straightforward and blunt. What's worse was the fact that she felt no regrets about it at all.

As expected, having received such an outright rejection, the boy was shocked. He tried to disguise his depressed expression with a forced smile.

"I see..... I guess that's only to be expected. Sorry, please forget about today. If we are in the same class again in our third year, please treat me the same as always, okay."

"Mm."

As Chiharu assented with a smile, she felt a prickling pain in chest. If she were to listen to his words and forget entirely about today's happening, would the boy actually be content?The answer was obvious. She thought to herself that she would try her best to keep today's event in her memories.

After watching the male student leave the classroom, Chiharu leaned on her desk.

"That's right. What a bummer, truly. Youth really isn't that easy-going."

Taking deep breaths with her face lying side-down on the desk, the texture of surface of the desk was reflected in her eyes.

Her long hair, which just barely went over what was allowed by the Nishito Sousei High School's school rules, stretched out. She had large pupils that made it easy to tell when she was awake or not, which was of not much use to her up till now. She also had a habit of humming, during which her face was described as 'resembling a cat' by her friends.

"Muu..... Ooah!"

With a jump, Chiharu stood up forcefully from her seat. Surely the boy who confessed to her would not want her to be depressed. Burying her emotions within, she exited the classroom.

As Chiharu walked along while looking out of the window, she unconsciously started to hum with a smile before she even realised. She came across many of the Sports club members in the middle of a run as she walked across the school

compound.

.....Yes, today was just another peaceful day. It may not be bad to experience such a youth with frequent worries.

Chiharu spoke to no one in particular in her heart.

—Chiharu took pride in herself as being quite an ordinary highschool girl, however, she had three strange idiosyncrasies.

The first one which was her ‘decisiveness trait’, as she had just displayed earlier. To put it in words, it means that her mind and her body were not in sync. There were more than just a few instances when her thoughts were unfinished yet she had undertaken some decisive actions.

The second was her humming. Often, she would start humming with a smile on her face out of nowhere. Who knew how many times had she started humming out of the blue during lessons, drawing the ire of the teachers.

The third and last idiosyncrasy was the most difficult to explain. Perhaps, one could call it a ‘narrating quirk’? She would narrate her daily life out loud, as if she was writing a letter. To whom she was addressing, even she herself did not know. However, this diary which had continued for years, would usually start with a ‘Dispensing with the preliminaries’ or ‘Dear...’. By this point, it was no longer a diary, but a bunch of letters that did not have an addressee.

Anyway, those were small peculiarities that anybody was bound to have one or two of no matter who. Or so that was what she wanted to believe.

“Hey! Yo! Excuse me!”

Opening the door to the room allotted to the Student Council, multiple familiar faces looked in her direction.

“One greeting is more than enough, Ayukawa-senpai.”

The person who said so with a bitter smile was a baby-faced first-year student, Tsushima Ayumu. He held the position of secretary.

“Ah! What is that, Tsushima-kun!”

Chiharu circled around in front of Ayumu as he laid out his lunch box.

“Oooh, that looks so good! Hey, Tsushima-kun, isn’t there something that you should say to your hungry and esteemed Vice-chairman?”

Placing both of her hands on the table, Chiharu looked up at Ayumu’s face with a coveting look. Ayumu turned slightly red and relented with a sigh.

“Fine, you may help yourself to an onigiri.”

Chiharu smiled with a *huu*, grasping her fist in victory behind her back. — Despite Ayumu’s present circumstance, he was in fact a playboy who had multiple lovers. The fact that Chiharu knew of it was also something Ayumu knew. Because of such, there was an unspoken rule between Chiharu and Ayumu and he often had to accede to her requests.

“Aah, wait..... not the kaarage! Even though that was the last one!”

“Ah! Why did you give it to Vice-chairman? Although I asked you for it earlier!”



The one who cut in from the side was Noda Saori, the accountant who was similarly a first-year student. She was also in the Swimming club and gave off an image of fitness. Aware of the feelings she bore towards Ayumu, Chiharu felt a little bad and reflected on the inside.

“Well, that’s because Ayukawa-senpai is different from Noda-san, she’s our senior.”

“Yes, yes, this is definitely not an abuse of power. There’s nothing, really. Anyway, is it ok for you not to attend club activities, Noda-chan?”

“I’m skipping today!”

“Yup, I hear you loud and clear.So Kanadome-kun attended properly too. That’s good!”

Sitting in the opposite end of the room with his legs placed on the table, Kanadome Naoki raised his head from his mobile phone. Dressed from head to toes in accessories that were forbidden by the school rules, he seemed most removed from what one would expect of an officer of the Student Council. However, he always attended such gatherings without fail, showing that he was a responsible general affairs officer.

Including the chairman who was heavily involved in club activities, the remaining members of the Student Council seemed to be absent as well. But, as the four of them who were the primary members in charge of routine tasks were gathered, there were no problems.

“That’s right. But anyway, we’re here to hear the report by Ayukawa, right. So?”

“Eh? Report?”

“Someone from your class confesses to you, right? So? Did you accept?”

Naoki flashed a grin. This caused Chiharu to widen her eyes.

“Wha-, wha-..... why do you know that!”

“S-senpai! What do you mean by someone confessed to you?”

“Why is it that part that Tsushima-kun concerned with?”

“The friend of the guy who confessed to you was also my friend. I heard from him that he would be confessing sometime soon. And then, you were late for this meeting. Thus, that was what I, the genius detective, deduced.”

“Don’t surprise me like that..... I thought for sure that some secret organisation was observing me or something.”

“So? What’s your response?”

“*No comment.* As the one in question, please do not dig into my privacy. Now, as this is our final task, let’s get it over with quickly.”

After giving a slight cough, Chiharu distributed the pile of documents placed on the table equally to each of the members. To facilitate the handing over of duties to the new Student Council in the new term, they were classifying the documents.

“At any rate, you’ve probably rejected him, what’s the point of all the secrecy now.”

“.....If you knew, then you shouldn’t even have asked.”

“Nope, that was just what I had thought. I see, so you refused.”

“Nice leading question, Kanadome-senpai.”

“What’s nice about that, Tsushima-kun.”

Thereafter, the four of them sorted the documents while chatting about meaningless things. As their chatter stopped halfway, Chiharu looked out of the window casually. She looked towards the running tracks in the field.

Indeed, this is not bad. This spring-like everyday life—.

Without her realising, her ‘narrating quirk’ emerged. She began to speak to a faceless, non-existent *someone*.

But, you know. Somehow, this..... how do I say it. It may be weird to say it like this, but perhaps you could call it a sense of guilt? For some reason, it feels like my current life does not seem to belong to me—.

“Anyway, there’s no saying that this would be our final task, wouldn’t it? At least for Ayukawa.”

At Naoki's sudden words, Chiharu turned to him. It sounded like he was denying what Chiharu had said earlier.

"Eh? Why do you say that?"

"What are you being in a daze for, next term's Student Council chairman? Even the three of us knows that you have the recommendation of lots of people."

Chiharu showed a bitter smile.

"Sorry, that's impossible. I don't have the qualities for that."

"Why is that so? If you indicate that you are running for chairman now, there's no doubt that Ayukawa-senpai would win."

"*Ahaha*, I'm glad to hear you say that. But, what can't be done cannot be helped."

Now was her 'decisiveness trait' in display. Although she felt happy about their support for her, she still clearly refused.

—I have a feeling that I..... shouldn't become the 'protagonist'. Hey, there's definitely something weird about me, right?

She spoke inside her mind to no one in particular.

"In that case, you can just be the Vice-chairman again. There's no problem with that, right?"

"If I can. But, at that time, I would forcefully drag all of you together with me, okay. If you are thinking of drawing me into something as troublesome as that, I wouldn't let the rest of you escape."

"That's fine by me. It's a promise, okay!"

"Fine, fine."

"I-I want to be part of the Student Council again too!Even if the advisor of the Swimming club disapproves....."

Talking and working at the same time in that vein, time passed in a blink of an eye. Due to them taking multiple breaks as well as Chiharu and Naoki going out to buy food, their progress was slower than expected.

By the time the western skies were dyed in the colours of sunset, Chiharu finally burst out.

“Oh, jeez! There’s no way we can finish everything today looking at what’s left! Are you guys actually working properly?”

“That’s weird. Although you distributed all the documents equally to us at the start, yet the one with the largest amount remaining is you, Ayukawa-senpai.”

“That’s..... looks like it’s impossible for today. Tomorrow, tomorrow is the day.”

“Uu..... I agree.”

In the end, they reached the conclusion that the work needed to be carried over till tomorrow.

After splitting up in front of the Student Council room, Chiharu headed for the school gate with her bag.

In the first place, she had chosen this school because of its proximity to her house. Thus, it was only a fifteen minutes’ walk away from home. Humming along as she walked, she soon reached her house.

As she tried to push open the door, she realised that it was locked. Now that she thought about it, her mother had told her earlier that she would be attending the neighbourhood association meeting and would be late. Likewise, her father was in the middle of a business trip and would only be back in a week.

She retrieved a key from her bag and unlocked the door.

“I’m back—”

As Chiharu took off her shoes, she called out to the empty house. As she did not have any siblings, there was obviously no response.

She climbed up the stairs and entered her own room. It was a simple room devoid of soft toys or posters. Having conducted a conference (or so they called it) for the Student Council in her room once, the four who attended the meeting today had visited it before. Naoki commented, ‘What a dull room’, while Ayumu remarked, ‘This is certainly a girl’s room but it’s unusually bland’. This led to the

scene where Saori questioned Ayumu, ‘Sounds as if you had visited lots of girl’s room’, but anyway, it was such a room.

A board hung barely off the wall on which photographs were pasted, all of which belonged to her during her time in middle school. As for photographs of her before that time—for some reason, there were none.

“Hmm.....?”

While closing the curtains so that she can change, Chiharu knitted her eyebrows.

She seemed to sense a human figure passing by through the window of the apartment opposite hers. Almost all of the sliding storm shutter of the rooms of the apartments were closed usually, with the exception of a room on the second floor which was always covered in darkness. As there never seemed to be light coming from the room, nor were there curtains blocking the view, she had always thought that nobody lived there.

A ghost.....?

Feeling shivers on her back, Chiharu shut the curtains. Taking off her uniform, she reached out for a sweatshirt from the closet and stopped.

“A ghost, huh..... don’t tell me that the girl from yesterday was really a ghost?”

She recalled the girl sleeping in the centre of the forest paradise.

Now that she thought back about it, just what was the feeling that was similar to a compulsion that she felt that time.

—She had first seen that girl yesterday, during her stroll back home after school.

The moment she saw her, all the buzz from the hustle and bustle became distant to her.

Be it the couple pleasantly chatting as they walked, or the salaryman returning home from work, or the catch-sales preying after females restlessly. —None of the them seemed to have notice the existence of the girl. Normally, upon seeing a girl walking on the streets in what looks like in-patient garbs, one

would at least have the reaction of turning around to look at her again.

Only Chiharu alone perceived the figure of the girl. In addition, she had a strange impression of her.

That was—a nostalgic feeling of having met her before.

As Chiharu herself had no memories of her face, that feeling disappeared immediately afterwards.

Nevertheless, Chiharu felt a burning curiosity about the bumbling girl. There shouldn't have been any basis for the nostalgia—no, there may be perchance. Even though it was contradictory, Chiharu thought so for some reason.

Secretly following the girl, they arrived at 'URBAN'. The girl entered the dome, into the lounge surrounded by trees and collapsed with a plop, falling asleep.

Chiharu wanted to watch over her for a while, but she did not look like she would wake up anytime soon.

She wondered what should she do. This did not seem like a situation that necessitated reporting to the police, but neither did it felt like calling an ambulance was needed. Above all, the girl herself seemed to be very comfortable, so she did not have any intention of disturbing her.

After around two hours, the girl showed some signs of waking up. Chiharu inadvertently hid into the shadow of a nearby tree.

Just as she thought the girl was still in a daze, the girl once again headed for the streets with unstable footsteps.

Chiharu could do nothing other than watch the girl walk away.

“.....”

She let go of the sweatshirt which she was holding. Instead, she opted for a shirt with a skirt, putting on a cardigan above that. Whenever she wore her plain clothes, she usually paired it with a hat. She reached out for a hunting cap, but immediately changed her mind and took the casquette instead.

Looks like her body had moved into action before her brain again. She went down the stairs to the entrance and tied the shoelace on her boots while humming.

Locking the door behind her, she left her home. She then got on her bicycle and raised her head.

“Youth is the age where one wants to embark on adventures, isn’t that right?”

With a grin, she spoke out to nobody in particular.

Subsequently, she rode in the direction of Nishito City, towards the lofty Urban Tower which reflected the orange sunset.

1.01 Chami Part 1

Stepping onto the rooftop of Urban Tower, an acrid odour assailed her nose.

“This place stinks of gasoline.”

Konomura Chami surveyed the surroundings and said so expressionlessly.

In fact, the odour was least of the matters. It could be said that the site that spread in front of her was in ruins. There were no doubts that a battle had occurred here.

Chami’s short hair fluttered in the wind. The smell of gasoline was blown away for only a moment before assaulting her nose once again.

Chami was currently in her plain clothes as she had not returned to her home to change. She was currently dressed in tights along with knickerbockers and a long t-shirt on top. The small-statured Chami was often mistaken for a middle school student, except for her gaze, which hid a sharpness that did not befit her age of sixteen years-old.

“Looks like it’s right here..... where the white cat received its fatal wound.....”

Konoha muttered in hushed voice from behind. She was a Rank 4 Blaze class member of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau’s Central Headquarters combat group, customarily positioned in Higano City. She was now in Nishito City after being called by Chami to ‘report’ to her. She was dressed in a simple jacket and culottes.

“I can see that for myself. We followed the traces of battle all the way up from the first floor. And here is the end of the line, *The End*. Or are you saying that they continued the battle in the air? Cats obviously can’t fly, so shut up if you’re not saying anything useful.”

“.....”

Throwing a look at *Konoha* telling her to be quiet, Chami ran over her thoughts.



.....Notwithstanding the effects of my ability, *Owl* was quite smart. She understood my orders and pressed on with the monitoring of Ayukawa Chiharu for over five years like an idiot. There's no reason that she would abandon her mission at this point of time..... In other words, that means that Ayukawa Chiharu came here, to 'URBAN'. Why would Chiharu come here—.

As she speculated in her mind, she traced the path of destruction starting from the entrance.

There, she fought against someone..... Seeing as how all the destruction came from one direction, the number of enemy was probably only one. In addition, the enemy must have been quite a powerful Mushitsuki. And also, the enemy was not attacking one-sidedly. If the cat had the intention to escape, all she had to do was to head towards a narrow location.

That *Owl* wanted to defeat that guy..... there can only be one reason. Chiharu was in danger..... that's to say, the enemy was targeting Chiharu and was about to take action that would harm Chiharu.

The earliest blood traces were found nearby the drum cans that held the gasoline. It must have been fuel for the crane.

Chami grinned.

.....*Kukuu*. She really thought well with that small brain of hers. Was she trying to burn up the enemy along with herself? But she failed and got hit by an attack. The place where she received the final attack was.....

Chami walked towards the hut with the water tank. The water tank and pumps had been destroyed, flooding the area with water. The gasoline and water mixture flowed down the drain which was installed onto the ground.

“.....”

Chami put on a serious look.

This is..... Did she purposely guided the enemy to attack here? Nah, she couldn't possibly think that far..... but, if I think about it..... what's the point of her doing that to an enemy she couldn't defeat?

Chami turned around and faced her back. She looked beyond the surprised

Konoha's shoulders, down at Urban Tower and Dome.

—How about we trudge onwards together along this shitty life!

Chami laughed scornfully with a *Hmm*.

Looking at the scars of battle, Chami understood *Owl's* dying wish, as well as the height of her loyalty towards her and felt irritated. Turning around, she glared towards *Konoha*.

“How dare you defy my order at your own convenience.”

“.....?”

How dare you go and die all by yourself without telling even informing your master—.

She averted her gaze away from the hut, between which *Konoha* was standing with her eyebrows frowning in puzzlement.

I now understand the gist of the situation.

Ayukawa Chiharu came to this place yesterday.

And then, she encountered a potential enemy there. —No, it is more correct to say that they almost met. Since I saw Chiharu attending school as per usual today, and she did not display any signs of encountering any life-threatening danger.

From the traces of human blood (or so, *Konoha* determined) on the first floor that continued till here, it seems that the attacker had already sustained heavy injuries. After defeating *Owl*, the enemy temporarily retreated.

“.....What a truly shitty mission from head to toe. Even though nothing happened all this time for five years.”

She cursed while descending the escalator.

Konomura Chami. Alternatively, that was who the Rank 10 Irregular class member of the Southwest Branch of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, codename *Ouru*, was. Being Rank 10 indicated that amongst the Mushitsuki, her power belonged to the next lowest rank above the unranked.

Five years ago, the mission that was given to her was one that was fit for the

lowest ranking members.

That was to monitor the person known as Ayukawa Chiharu.

But, that was all. Without even telling her any reasons, she did not even know what kind of dangers would arise specifically. At that time, having only recently been turned into a Mushitsuki and yet to even finish her training, it was clearly a daunting mission.

In the documents submitted by Chami periodically, the last sentence in the report about Chiharu's behaviour was always, 'No abnormalities'. The next report was also, 'No abnormalities', followed by, 'No abnormalities'..... and this continued on for five years.

The returning orders were always, 'Continue monitoring'.

'Continue monitoring'—She might as well have fabricated a report for submission, and they would not have made any effort to confirm the validity of the report and just continued sending the same orders mechanistically.

Had she not delegated the task to *Owl*, one of the person, or rather, one of which she converted into her servant, she would have gone crazy from the monotony of the task. It was truly a shitty mission given by a shitty organisation.

That foolish organisation, the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. Being so incompetent, surely, they would not have known of it.

How that in these five years, Chami's ability, which could only influence a cat at the start, had matured. And how that this lone Mushitsuki, which they have evaluated as the lowest rank, would eventually turn around to bite them, bringing to them certain destruction—.

"I'll continue on with this shitty mission using the minimum effort. More importantly, isn't it about time you tell me what has been happening in the central area."

While descending the escalator, Chami ordered that of *Konoha*. As *Konoha* had just arrived in Nishito City yesterday, Chami had yet to hear of the crucial details from her.

“I’ve only heard until the part where *Kakkou* defeated one of the *Original Three*, *Shinpu*, prior to which, *Ladybird* as well.”

Konoha, who was walking behind Chami without making any sound of footsteps, replied in a whispery voice.

“*Fuyuhotaru* had escaped from the Central Headquarters.....”

“I”

“At that time, three special teams had been organised at the order of Vice-director Miguruma.....”

“Three teams? Why did she purposely split the command structure? Seems like Miguruma Yaeko is an idiot as well.”

“.....I was part of the pursuit team chasing after *Fuyuhotaru* but..... at the same time, there were two other orders of the same risk level..... One was the retrieval of the *disk*..... its contents were not revealed, but the one who stole the *disk* was said to be *Centipede*.....”

Chami stopped her legs which were going down the escalator, causing the trailing *Konoha* stopped as well.

“Don’t you say some nonsensical stuff. Isn’t *Centipede* one of the Mushibane’s executives who had been turned into a Fallen? Where did you even get that from?”

Mushibane referred to the resistance group that had been created to oppose SEPB’s actions of capturing Mushitsuki. After their leader, a girl known as *Ladybird*, died in a battle against a bureau member, *Kakkou*, their remnants were currently dispersed.

“*Centipede* was recaptured promptly after, but..... I saw the conversation between the girl who escaped with the disk and leader of the retrieval team, *Kasuou*..... For some reason, the girl was moving together with *Fuyuhotaru* and were escaping in the direction of Ouka City..... Also during the chase, from the contents of the dialogue between ‘C’ and *Fuyuhotaru*.....”

“Even the battle-crazed *Kasuou* and the databank of the headquarters, ‘C’? If the mission involved such high-ranked personnel, there must be some

credibility to your story. That *disk* must have been an extremely important item. And then, that disk landed into the hands of none other than *Kakkou*. In other words, the ‘heart’ of the battles had landed into the hands of the protagonist..... The person who delivered the disk may not have realised it themselves, but they had completed a great task. —So, you must have seen the contents of the disk?”

“.....”

Konoha bit her lips. Chami clicked her tongue and grabbed her by her collars.

“Are you an idiot? If you weren’t looking at the crucial contents, just what the hell have you been doing!”

“.....”

“You said three teams were assembled. Apart from the *Fuyuhotaru* pursuit team and the *disk* retrieval team, what’s the last one.”

“That is..... the Rank 4 me was not informed.....”

“*Tch*, you’re thoroughly useless! Why do you think I taught you how to manoeuvre and contrive, rising you to Rank 4! I’m not even asking you to reach Rank 1. Rank 2..... no, at least get yourself up to Rank 3!”

Facing Chami’s words of blame, *Konoha* only bit her lips and put up with it. Chami deepened her frown and slammed *Konoha* against the wall.

“Say something, you gloomy woman! You disgust me!”

“.....When are you going to..... find it for me.....”

Konoha murmured, her shoulders trembling. Unable to endure further, she glared back at Chami from within her forelocks.

“I..... am not your servant..... I only promised to cooperate with you..... if you helped me find the fifth Rank 1..... the one who killed that person.....”

She said in a trembling, whispery voice.

Faint red smoke emanated from *Konoha*’s body. Only being visible to Chami, the smoke consolidated into the figure of a queen bee.

It was a part of Chami’s Mushi, which she had embedded into *Konoha*

previously.

There were three types of Mushi, the Minion type, the Special type, as well as the Fusion type. People were turned into Mushitsuki when they encounter the *Original Three*, but which type of Mushi they would have depends on which one of the three they came into contact with.

Mushi like that of *Konoha's*, which are capable of independent movement are known as Minion types. They were a result of the existence known as *Oogui*.

Mushi like that of Chami's, which on the other hand, does not have a physical body are known as Special types. Compared to the other two types which possesses comparatively stronger physical power, there are wide varieties of supernatural abilities which Special types could wield. Mushitsuki borne of the existence known as *Shinpu* were always of the Special type.

Mushi of the Fusion type merge with their host to give them superhuman strength. This type of Mushi was the least populous of the three, and the existence which gives rise to the Fusion type was known as *Sanbikime*, the most mysterious of the *Original Three*.

“.....”

Chami swung her right hand. The palm of her hand struck *Konoha's* cheek, causing a *pachin* sound to echo down the tower.

“.....!”

“Don't you dare talk back to me. I wouldn't mind throwing you away right here.”

Konoha held her palm to her cheek, glaring at Chami with killing intent. The red queen bee that surrounded *Konoha* expanded in size.

Chami's ability—it manifests in a person whose heart held some insecurities when a chink in their heart is encroached in by her Mushi. Her Mushi, the queen bee, is able to intensify the strongest emotion hidden deep in the target's heart. It causes that emotion to exceed its reasonable limit, robbing away the target's sense of reason. Manipulating the people who had lost their ability to make sensible judgement then is a very easy task for Chami.

It was an ability that contaminated the spirit, one that merely stimulated the target's emotions. Even amongst the abilities capable of controlling the psyche, it had only been evaluated as trivial. It could not be used to forcefully dominate someone else. That was why it was determined to be the lowest rank of Rank 10.

However, Chami's true *strength* laid in the proficiency of the ability user herself. By converting those whose ability to think had declined into her allies, Chami brainwashed them without them even realising it into believing that they were useless unless she was by their side.

The organisation known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau only placed importance in the ability of the Mushi itself, thus overlooking Chami's hidden potential. To Chami, that was unbearably humiliating.

"What can you possibly do by yourself? Go on, say it! Other than being able see somewhere given the 3D coordinates or in certain conditions, there's nothing else you can do!"

At Chami's words, *Konoha's* shoulders quivered. The emotion that the girl was currently holding on to was *rage*. Underneath her downcast face, a constantly seething anger brewed.

—Any more provocation than this is dangerous. If one's emotions were over-amplified, their mind and body would be broken. If not properly handled, it is possible that they may turn into an enemy. This ability that isn't capable of mental domination, but only mental pollution was designated to Rank 10 for this reason.

It would not do to have *Konoha* broken right now. This girl still has some uses.

"You will definitely meet the fifth Rank 1 that deprived you of your lover. I will ultimately arrive at the 'heart' of the mystery behind Mushitsuki, and then, it's a matter of time before I take over the SEPB."

Controlling all of the Mushitsuki and reigning above them—that was Chami's true ambition.

Although the existence known as the Mushi were surrounded in mysteries, their power were overwhelmingly huge. Once she has the SEPB under her

control, with the power of Mushitsuki troops, she would be able to obtain anything. Indeed, even if it was this country.

For that purpose, there was a need for her to know exactly what are the Mushi. Rather, Chami felt that knowing the secret behind the Mushi is the key to controlling the Mushitsuki.

“Didn’t you swear your loyalty to me? There’s already no turning back for you now. If you stop now, you would be left with nothing. Isn’t that right?”

“.....”

Konoha was biting her lips so hard that they had turned pale white. The figure of the queen bee that enveloped the girl faded away from Chami’s view.

However, that certainly did not mean that Chami’s Mushi had disappeared from within *Konoha*. As usual, the Mushi’s fine needle was always stimulating the girl’s anger as always.

Konoha was still sprawled on the floor without moving, her shoulder’s shaking.

“.....Fine. Suits yourself. My connection with you ends here. You can go wherever you want.”

“.....!”

Konoha grabbed Chami’s clothes from behind as she faced her back.

“There’s nowhere..... that I can go..... I’ll listen to you..... so.....”

Chami stared coldly at *Konoha* who was muttering with tears forming in her eyes.

“Don’t ever talk back to me, you understand.”

“.....”

“Go and investigate the contents of the disk. Right now.”

“H-how do I.....”

“Why don’t you use your rotting brains for once. Surely, there’s some guy who watched the contents. Do whatever it takes to get them to spill it out.”

Leaving those words, Chami left 'URBAN'.

Walking down the street, she headed for the residential area.

It was already evening by the time she reached her destination. The Ayukawa house which was lit by the evening glow was completely silent.

"....."

She turned her heels, entering the apartment opposite that. On the second floor, she placed her hand on one of the doors lining the corridor.

There were no locks on the door. Cool air welcomed Chami as she entered the apartment.

There was a refrigerator. Together with a television and a chair by the window, that was all she saw. She took off her shoes and entered, finding a bed further inside. On top of the sheets, strands of pure white fur glistened under the evening rays.

".....Ugh."

She saw the figure of Chiharu through the window of the Ayukawa house and hid herself. Looks like her arrival had coincided with Chiharu's return.

Chami sat on the bed, gazing mindlessly at the scenery outside of the window. Just how many years had it been since she returned to this apartment. She hasn't visited this apartment since she left the support of *Owl* to one of her female classmate known as Sugitsu Aya whom she turned into one of her pawns.

"The *disk*..... and *Centipede* who was supposed to have been turned into a Fallen."

Chami muttered to herself.

When the Mushi of a Mushitsuki is killed, the Mushitsuki turns into a Fallen, which is a soulless shell of their former self. Once they turn into a Fallen, there should have no chance for their humanity to return.

There had only been a single exception, that was *Fuyuhotaru*.

If *Konoha's* words were to be trusted, that would mean the appearance of

Mushitsuki that can awaken from the Fallen status other than *Fuyuhotaru*. That would also mean that *Fuyuhotaru* was not actually special. Thus, the secret..... no matter how Chami thought about it, must lie within that *disk*.

But, it would've been impossible for Chami to view the actual disk itself. Due to the technology of the disk used by the SEPB, any information in the disk would be automatically erased by itself after a few days.

“.....?”

Chami's gaze fell onto a piece of paper lying by the side of the bed.

It was a search order circulated by the Central Headquarters. The instructions have most likely reached the whole country by now. Chami had written it off as unimportant and passed it onwards to *Owl* through Aya. As this room was one granted by the SEPB after all, it was a suitable place to store this kind of documents.

The name, Horisaki Azusa, was noted under the facial photograph of a girl. The photograph showed a beauty with long hair, but it was only now that Chami realised the shockingly high risk level associated with her. The reason for her capture was not listed down, as per the usual search orders issued by Headquarters.

The order had nothing to do with Chami as she expected. To her currently, figuring out the secrets of the Mushitsuki was foremost, as well as working out a plan to get Central Headquarters under her control. She did not have any spare attention to pay to things other than those.

In fact, Chami's mission to keep an eye on Ayukawa Chiharu did not mean a thing to her. She had neglected that mission for five years. The organisation which passed down this order to her has probably forgotten about it too.

“.....”

Chami shifted her attention to the chair by the side of the window.

The reason she did not visited this room for years. That being the attitude of *Owl* who she turned into her servant on a whim.

The typically silent white cat would purr out in happiness upon seeing her.

With a creepy-sounding laughter, it would cuddle up to Chami. To Chami—that was uncomfortable.

At this time, the number of servants Chami commanded numbered many. *Owl* was merely one of the many.

When she saw the dying expression of the cat which shared the same name as her, she did not feel much of a tremor in her heart.

The time to come had arrived—that was all she felt.

Deep in her heart, Chami knew better than anyone else how she was but a small accessory that no one even bothered to turn their heads around to look at. At most, all she knew were the intricacies of her ability, which she sneakily used to devise sinister designs. If she was in the casting of a movie, the only roles she would play would be Villain A or Pedestrian A.

On the other hand, the people at the ‘heart’ of the Mushitsuki are endlessly strong. The Central Headquarters, *Kakkou*, *Fuyuhotaru*, Harukiyo—in the eyes of those people who were in the lead roles, someone like Chami probably didn’t even cross their eyes.

But, on that day, an ambition sprouted from within Chami.

—How about we trudge onwards together along this shitty life!

Chami would die one day.

She might die any day without anybody even realising, not having even secured the footholds for her ambition. To the protagonists of the story, even her short act was just a sideshow to add towards their performance in the ‘heart’ of the stage.

Her story was one such that she never knew when it would end, an uncouth and subdued story of cowardice. As she never knows when it might end, she would continue onwards no matter how many of her pawns are lost. However, that white cat was the one at the very start of her story.

“Damn it, this is so irritating. This sentimentality.....”

It was now that Chami realised for the first time, that the white cat would no longer be by her side as she walks along this story which no one ever takes

notice of.

“Loyalty, huh..... what rights do I even have to speak of it. How could *Konoha* possibly have any of it, after all, I was just forcibly getting her to help me.”

Chami laughed to herself, staring at the strands of white fur left on the chair.

“Now that I thought about it, you may have been the only one to swear loyalty to me.....”

1.02 The Others

Damn it.....! So, in the end, I'm the only one left of the team!

"Ugh....."

Kanata, a Rank 3 Blaze class member of the Annihilators from the Central Headquarters of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, groaned from within the darkness.

After overexerting his strength getting away from 'URBAN' last night, he spent the night collapsed in the shadow of a back alley. It would take him some more time before he recovers to a degree that allows him to move about. Though not to an extent where he can get full-fledged medical treatment and recuperation, he still needed to find a place out of people's eye that allowed him to apply first-aid.

It was by luck that he managed to find a bankrupt pharmaceutical store in the corner of the shopping district of Nishito City. Trespassing into the store by forcing open the backdoor, he found medicine boxes scattered all across the floor. Seems like he would be able to find some painkillers. In addition, he found some bandages, which he roughly wrapped around his wounds.

Treating the medicine boxes as a bed, *Kanata* laid down with his face up. He wiped away the sweat perspiring from his face, producing a *zaza* sound as it rubbed against his stubble. With his dishevelled hair and moustache, most people who saw him would not have guessed that he was only nineteen years-old.

When he looked at his hand which he used to wipe away his sweat, he saw red blood sticking onto his hand. —Having already lost feeling on half of his face, he forgot that a deep gash was etched from his cheek till his ear.

"Haah....."

Disregarding the wound on his face, the injury on his abdomen ached with each breath he took. His mental strength seemed to sap away together with his

blood. On the surface it was just a laceration, but it was clear that that was no ordinary wound.

The Annihilators that *Kanata* belonged to was an elite squad wrapped in secrecy that reported directly to Vice-director Miguruma Yaeko. They received mobilisation orders in the off-chance that someone defects from the SEPB. As can be told from their name, their mission was not the capturing of the target. It was to annihilate, leaving nothing left behind.

An order was passed down from Miguruma.

The content of the order was the erasure of a target known as Horisaki Azusa who had escaped from the confinement facility.

A special team of six person was expressly assembled to annihilate a lone person, and a girl at that. All the members chosen were Rank 6 and above. He had expected the opponent to be considerably strong, but that with this team, he had no doubts that they would be able to fulfil the mission in no time and return.

Despite all of that, he had ended up in this pathetic state.

Thinking back, this mission had reeked of suspicion before they even departed. For *Kanata* who had worked as an assassin before joining the organisation under the Annihilators, he had felt a nagging doubt on his mind.

“*Kuu.....!*”

Now that he remembered, he felt irritated.

—Hey, *Kanata-san*. Did you know? The mission you were given is the same as that of *Kasuou*, to silence one of the resurrectee of a certain experiment.

The one who had said that was a boy (or perhaps it was a girl) as *Kanata* was prepared to set off from Headquarters. If he recalled correctly, he was one of the comrades of the shady Rank 1, Harukiyo. Harukiyo had referred to him as Ume.

—What experiment?

—The experiment to bring a Fallen back to life. Though the other resurrectee, Centipede, seemed to have been dispatched of by *Kasuou* already.

—That's impossible. *Fuyuhotaru* was supposed to be the only resurrectee.

—That's right. Then how was it that were they able to come back to life? No, it's more like, why is it that **only they came back to life?**

That's ridiculous, thought *Kanata* as he left with a laugh. Those were truly the words of someone incomprehensible, he could not make sense of anything he said. He did not understand why were they allowed to join the Annihilators, not to mention why did Miguruma let them run loose.

'If you're so curious, then why don't you ask Harukiyo to join the team?', *Kanata* said so sarcastically to Ume, to which he replied.

—'I am not a simple-minded one-celled organism like *Kakkou* that I would rejoice from just defeating a *fragment*', or so, Harukiyo said as such.

There's no doubts that they were absolutely dubious people. It was as if they were aliens from another planet, I can't grasp what's in their mind at all.

It was an easy matter to track Horisaki Azusa's footsteps.

There was a member in the team that had the ability to pinpoint the target's location based on their smell. Azusa had first headed to Ouka City before coming here to Nishito City. There was no consistency to her movement at all as she travelled east before heading to the west again. Her movements seemed to be like that of *Kanata* and the rest, as if she was chasing after someone.

Finally having chased Azusa to Nishito City, *Kanata* and the rest moved in to assassinate the girl without hesitation.

But—.

"Damn it.....!"

Cursing out loud reflexively, pain wracked his wound.

—Before he even realised, the only one left standing was *Kanata* alone.

The only person to witness the whole event from the start till the end was probably only him alone as well. Azusa had turned around with a grin to face him and the rest who were about to assault her.

He recalled the darkness that seemed to cloud her eyes as well as the

ominous sound that rang out.

Goong..... the sound of a bell heavily reverberated. Immediately, the air in the surroundings turned viscous, like as if they were breathing in water.

—It can't be helped that one of the *vessel* seeking the king has lost its objective..... but this *vessel* has yet to fulfil its duty. If ye dare to obstruct thee, thy shalt spare no mercy.....

The words that came out of the girl who had darkness in her pupils sounded like that of a hoarse old man. From the shoulder of the girl holding one hand up, countless caterpillars could be seen crawling up.

A black fog enveloped the area, with anguished screams sounding after each other. The Mushi of the team members seemed to be assimilated into the fog, losing their shapes.

The fog that *ate* the Mushi then converged onto the girl and disappeared. The scene of the girl swallowing a gulp then was only seen by *Kanata*. Only his Mushi barely held onto its shape, while the rest of the team had already been turned into Fallen and collapsed onto the ground.

Raising a roar, *Kanata* set his two-headed centipede onto the girl. The centipede drew out its remaining strength, raising a trailer and throwing it at the girl. However, the girl easily dodged it. Having most of its strength suck out, the centipede's speed was considerably slower.

The girl wrapped in the black fog used her hand to rip into *Kanata's* body.

—It seems like there's still some time needed to head to the king's side. Thy child by thee side wouldst surely obstruct thee for the sake of thou dream..... Thou canst end the life of thy child who is destined to protect the king.....

The recipient of the mutterings did not seem to be *Kanata*. Paying no more attention to him who had collapsed, Azusa then left the area.

Though he had no idea who Horisaki Azusa was, the greatest mystery was still what happened after.

Chasing after Azusa while bearing wounds, what awaited him as he arrived at 'URBAN' was something blocking his way.

It was a single white cat.

For him who was lost in rage, he wanted to dispatch even that tiny animal and continue on his pursuit of Azusa. By that time, the only thought that ran through his head was slaughtering everything that stood in his way.

However, he never would have thought that he would receive a counter-attack. The white cat evaded his attack and even dug its claws into his face. Furthermore, as if to divert his attention, it ran into the tower before being cornered on the rooftop. Even then, it tried to scatter gasoline all over the rooftop, with the intention of burning him to death along with itself.

And also—.

—*Kuhuu*.

The cat laughed.

All of the senses and fear that had been numbed in the middle of the battle assailed *Kanata*. He thought that he had finally snapped and gone crazy.

“What the hell is with this mission.....! What’s with this city! Just..... what the hell is going on!”

Breathing heavily, he shouted out in anger while quivering.

The target for assassination, Horisaki Azusa, was a Fallen who was resurrected (if Ume’s words were to be believed).

Seeing the current actions of Horisaki Azusa, there were no doubts about it. The reason she came to this city was to look for a specific person. The king, was what she mentioned.

Chasing after Azusa, what appeared was instead a strange white cat. Did that have anything to do with Azusa? Or was it a completely different matter from her?

But, *Kanata* was still alive. Even if he had gone mad, he still survived.

He had grasped Azusa’s ability. If he stayed away from the fog, he would be able to keep damage to a minimum. Keeping a distance away and attacking in one breath, dealing as much damage as possible—he should be able to win against her this way. He had deduced that the fog was unable to block physical

matters judging from how the girl had dodged his attacks.

There's no escape for her the next time.

He will show that he is able to fulfil his duty, the one assigned to him by Miguruma.

“.....”

Duty.

Yes, the duty allotted to *Kanata* was none other than to fight.

At the age where children of the same age as him went to primary school, he had been brawling in the back alley the whole time. After defeating those who were in the same circumstances as him, the mid-teens him was had been employed as a bouncer in the local gangs. The hostile gangs all feared his style of fighting, which lacked any mercy and limits.

But, the gang was demolished after a round-up by the local police. Having lost the place for him to fight, *Kanata* was left with nothing. The realisation that he was empty inside due to the disappearance of his fighting ground left him in shock.

—Somebody..... give me a place to fight..... if not, I.....

Clinging onto that thought, it became his dream.

Ever since he became a Mushitsuki, he never ran out of battles. And then, he was chosen by the Central Headquarters to enter the Annihilators that was organised by Vice-director Miguruma, to massacre all who would defect from the SEPB.

—From today onwards, I will give you my love. That's why you should give me your love too.

Being the one who had given him a new stage to fight, he saw Miguruma Yaeko as a goddess.

As long as *Kanata* fought, Miguruma Yaeko would acknowledge his existence. This way, he was also fulfilling his dream as well.

That was why he had never once bore any doubts about his missions or

duties.

That was until now.

—*Kuhuu*.

His ears seemed to pick up the laughing voice of the cat.

That white cat—the laughter of the cat that may have been born out of *Kanata's* hallucination was imprinted onto his eardrum and would not stop.

The figure of the cat laughing proudly even as it was wounded seems as if..... yes, as if it had fulfilled the purpose for which it was born; looking as if it was jubilant that its life has borne results.

It seems that the cat had a reason to fight.

For whom? For what purpose?

If the cat has been fighting for the sake of somebody—if it was following the orders given to it by somebody, then was it satisfied to have been able to fulfil the order?

Then, what about *Kanata*?

To fight, to get injured, and then head on to the next battlefield, would he be able to find salvation eventually with such a dream.....?

“Just what the heck was that cat..... I don’t understand it at all.....”

He grumbled to himself.

He suppressed the tiny emotion that sprouted from within his heart. Ignoring the matter about the cat, he focused his attention on completing the mission ahead of him.

With his deep wounds, he still required some time before he can move his body again even after he stops bleeding. He needed the help of somebody else. He thought of how he could contact the other members stationed in this city after he has recovered to the point where he could move.

The next time they meet, he would definitely kill Horisaki Azusa.

However, there was also the possibility that the one who would be killed would be him instead.

—*Kuhuu*.

If he was at death's door, would *Kanata* be laughing as the cat did while welcoming the last moments of his life?

“Who the hell cares..... a cat like that..... has nothing to do with me.....”

He spat out a few mutterings.

He wiped his cheeks, recalling the smile of Miguruma Yaeko.

“If I continue fighting, that person would give me even more battlefields..... till the next battlefield..... and the one after that.....”

Until he passed out from the fever due to his wounds, *Kanata* muttered over and over again.

—Horisaki Azusa must have exhausted much of her strength.

There were no doubts about that. That was the reason why she did not finish him off. He also saw that the darkness surrounding Azusa was about to fade away as she approached ‘URBAN’.

Azusa must have wanted to rest her body in this city. Also, from her previous words, there seems to be someone else who is trying to stop her. She must have been trying to store energy, waiting for the opportune time to take action.

However, *Kanata* was similarly weakened. *Kanata* had confidence in his healing ability, he needed just a few days before he returns to a level fit for combat.

It would be time to settle the fight once and for all once *Kanata's* stamina is restored. If Azusa was not able to completely recover, then he would finish the match in one breath. To prevent her possible escape, he would need to prepare some kind of bait. Including that, he still had lots of time to devise a plan.

In a few days, *Kanata* would show that he can defeat Horisaki Azusa. That was what he pledged of himself.

“I would complete this mission without fail..... so, continue to give me more battles..... Vice-director Miguruma.....”

As the assassin bated his breath in the dark, he seemed to hear the cat's

laughter in his ears.

1.03 The Others

In Nishito Imperial Hotel, a luxury hotel near the station of Nishito City, there was a suite on the topmost floor.

Consisting of two bedrooms and a living room, the area was quite spacious. Each room was equipped with high-quality furniture that were made overseas; the sofas were so soft that one would pretty much sink into the cushions when sat on.

Munakata Kaiji was an owner of multiple hotels in the cities and resort areas. He owned 80% of the shares of this Imperial Hotel too, the hotel being just before acquisition so to speak. At the sudden appearance of this major shareholder without even an appointment, the hotel staff frantically rushed to prepare this suite for him.

“.....”

In the living room closest to the entrance, a few people were seated in silence.

Munakata Kaiji was seated in a one-seater chair. He was a middle-aged man with white strands mingled in his swept back hair. Never having hired any secretary or driver before, he was truly one-man proprietor who had accumulated a large amount of wealth. He was dressed in a high-quality suit and was holding a glass filled with liquid in one hand.

Across the table where Munakata was at, Anmoto Shiika was sitting by herself on a three-seater sofa. She was the one classified as a Rank 1 Secret class Mushitsuki by the SEPB, as well as the only one who had recovered from the Fallen status. She was wearing a blue one-piece dress that was prepared by the hotel according to Munakata instructions. She was hanging her head downcasted with a nervous expression, seemingly being unable to raise her face.

Two other people sat around the table.

The boy in his mid-teens seated on a double-sofa was Kandori Youichi. He was dressed in a shirt and jeans giving off a rough look, grinning in the direction of Shiika.

Leaning against the fireplace with her arms folded was Sugitsu Matsuri, whose lanky body was donned in a school uniform. Unlike Youichi, who was hailed from afar yesterday, she was a local highschool girl. Although she had the characteristics of a typical Japanese with long, straight hair and thin-slit eye, her lips which formed a straight line revealed a stormy aura.

On the other side—seated in the sofa furthest from the rest and staring out of the window was Shirotani Reiji. He was stifling a yawn with his arms crossed behind his headband. To the sixteen years-old him, he had no interest at all in the presently awkward atmosphere of silence.

“.....Where is she? Wasn’t she the one who wanted to meet *Fuyuhotaru* the most?”

Munakata broke the silence with a single discreet sentence, his gaze not leaving his glass.

“‘I do not have the face to meet *Fuyuhotaru*’—was what she said.”

Youichi answered. He shrugged his shoulders, looking at Shiika who was tilted her head in puzzlement.

“Even if that was the case, it would’ve been impossible to gather all the executives of Mushibane so abruptly. Isn’t the place where we were meant to gather further to the west? Why did you stop in this city in the middle of nowhere?”

“Well, sorry for being in the middle of nowhere.”

Matsuri scowled her face. She was born and raised in this city and was displeased to hear that.

“Sorry about that. Oh yeah, what happened to you sister?”

“I couldn’t get across to her. After all, it’s so sudden.”

“I will explain why we gathered here later. Firstly, let’s begin with our introductions.”

Munakata directed his hand directly to the front of Shiika.

“This is Anmoto Shiika. The new leader of Mushibane, *Snowfly*.”

The ones who widened their eyes were not only Youichi and Matsuri. Shiika herself seemed the most surprised and looked at Munakata wordlessly.

“Wha-! Huh? Wait a minute!”

“W-what do you mean, Munakata-san! New leader?”

“E-erm..... I am.....?”

“Shiika-kun. They are two of the currently remaining executives of Mushibane. Besides them, there are several others who are in charge of our many members. Apart from Mushitsuki, we also have ordinary people amongst our ranks.”

Ignoring the three who were in confusion, Munakata continued.

“I am one of their, Mushibane’s, collaborators. I will mainly be supporting them by providing funds and facilities as such, a patron of sort—”

“Munakata-san!”

The one who raised his voice was Youichi. The smile was gone from his face, replaced by that of anger. He had roughly grabbed Munakata’s collars.

“I’m going to feel troubled if you keep continuing on your own. You may have provided quite a bit of help to us, but that does not give you the rights to do whatever you want with us. When and who decided that a kid like her is going to replace *Lady* as our leader?”

“She’s not a kid, *Sinica*. Her age is the same as yours and *Lady*’s, as is *Aijisupa*. Though *Halen* is one year older than all of you.”

“The problem is not her age. Why don’t you tell us the reason first why should she be our leader.”

Matsuri cut in. Although her tone was polite, her voice was pointedly cold.

In this perilous atmosphere, the person in question, Shiika, was dumbfounded and could not move her body at all. Then, as if she just came into her senses, she looked flusteredly back and forth between Munakata and the other two.

“.....*Tch.*”

Reiji clicked his tongue softly.

He couldn't care less about who was the leader. The discussion had quickly turned into a disagreement just as he had expected. But, Shiika's attitude as if she was just an ordinary girl pissed him off.

In his heart, he asked his deceased friend.

Is this person really the *Fuyuhotaru* that you were talking about, Rina?

“Before I explain, I need to reconfirm the state of Mushibane right now. This explanation is for you too, *Snow*. Please listen closely to it and commit it to your head.”

“.....Y-yes!”

“Currently, Mushibane is composed of lesser than 300 Mushitsuki, as well as around 100 ordinary people who are collaborating. After the decisive battle against the SEPB's East Central Branch at Hashiba City last Christmas, followed by the defection of *Bee Hawk-moth* and their ensuing fight at Housawa Town, we've lost many members, and we currently number far lower than that at our prime. However, that is certainly not the main problem.”

Munakata started retelling while still looking at the glass in his hand detachedly. Shiika did as she was told and concentrated on listening while Youichi and Matsuri kept their mouth closed with displeased expressions.

“Tachibana Rina—”

Munakata muttered, his eyebrow ever creasing slightly. Youichi and Matsuri's countenance too visibly hardened. Shiika too, knowingly bit her lips. Only one person, Reiji, looked on impassively.

“The root of the problem lies in the loss of *Ladybird*. At the time that she, who was founder and the source of our hopes, was lost, the reason for the existence of Mushibane may have already been lost. In fact, the moment I heard she died, I thought all was lost. We..... have lost.”

“.....”

A heavy silence blanketed the living room. Youichi lowered his head and tears

started to form in Matsuri's eye.

"To be honest, what happened after that does not matter at all. Mushibane, which had been apportioned into four districts of East, West, North and South, were each led by leaders appointed by *Lady* till then. Once *Lady* was gone, they all started to undergo independent movements, falling into a state of separation in no time. I did not have any intentions of stopping it at that time, and probably neither did the other members apart than me."

The lack of any dissenting voice affirmed his words.

"Shirakashi Ubuki—even when that SEPB member in collusion with us proposed a transaction, I did not have any interest at all. But, amongst us, there was only one lone person who moved to action. That was him, *Aijisupa*."

The gaze of four people gathered onto Reiji. He did not take them into regard, coolly accepting their gaze.

"I had always wanted to ask about that guy. Just who is he? This is the first time I saw him."

"I wanted to ask as well."

Hearing their words, Shiika looked at Reiji in surprise. She had thought that Reiji was also one of Mushibane's executives.

"He is not from Mushibane. No, I should say that he was not from Mushibane. According to his words, he was Rina's childhood friend. He is also a Mushitsuki. Seeing that he was looking for the whereabouts of *Lady*, I contacted him first. It was just as I was thinking of whether to ignore Shirakashi Ubuki's proposal or not."

Breathing out with a *huu*, Munakata placed the glass on the table.

"—He's strong. From what I can see, I think he should be around Rank 3 or higher by SEPB's standards."

"!"

Youichi and Matsuri's expression changed. But, what appeared on their face was anger.

"Rina's childhood friend you say.....? Not to mention, he is strong? You want

us to believe these questionable words? In the first place, if it was as you said, then why did he only join Mushibane now!”

At Youichi’s words, Reiji thought.

—I’m gonna head to Ouka City.

Rina, whose figure he had not seen in over a year, returned to Akamaki City all of a sudden one day. The girl, who was surrounded by young boys and girls which he did not know, had said that to him with a smile.

—Are you okay?

When Reiji asked that, Rina only flashed a lonely smile.

“.....Well. I wonder why.”

Having their doubts answered in this manner, the two people were enraged.

“Even if you were not part of Mushibane, if you were truly strong then shouldn’t you have helped her anyway! Aren’t you her childhood friend!”

Matsuri questioned him in a fierce tone.

—You know. I might die tomorrow.

When Rina enrolled in a high school at Ouka City, there were much less opportunities for them to meet. However, they would still converse on the phone occasionally.

It was the day before Christmas Eve, Rina had suddenly said that over the phone. Although she would always make jokes in front of him, he could tell from her weak voice that she was serious. He thought that she was probably speaking the truth.

—That’s why, I have a request for you.

—Fine. I’ll listen to anything.

Hearing Rina’s composed voice, Reiji answered immediately. Rina was not surprised.

That was because Rina and Reiji had exchanged a certain ‘agreement’ before. Whenever Rina would request Reiji for help, he would accept it without any hesitation. Rina knew of that as well.

“If she had called me for help that time, I would probably have come to help.”

Reiji muttered absentmindedly.

Rina’s request.

If she had requested for his cooperation, he would have just complied. However, Rina did not depend on him even at the very end.

“But, her last request was nothing like that.”

In the suite wrapped in silence, Reiji’s soliloquy mutterings resounded greatly.

“She just wanted me to stay by Anmoto Shiika’s side from now on, but did not request for me to help her either. What would she do after inheriting Rina’s will—that’s all I’m interested in.”

“.....! I can’t accept that all! In addition to just watching as Rina die, you don’t even intend to help *Fuyuhotaru*? You want us to welcome a guy like him as our ally, Munakata-san!”

“*Aijisupa*..... you lent me your strength to get back Snow. Do you not have any intentions of becoming this girl’s strength from now onwards?”

“I only did that because it was hindering me from meeting with her. Now, having been able to meet up with the person herself like this, I won’t do anything other than watch her actions. Whether she lives or dies, I’ll just watch till the conclusion.”

“.....You shitty bastard.”

Matsuri spat out in aversion. She then unfolded her arms and turned to face Munakata.

“That’s out of the question, Munakata-san. I had heard about *Fuyuhotaru* being one of *Lady*’s friend, I have no objections about taking her into our protection. But, it’s impossible for me to accept her as our leader, and to treat that shitty bastard as our comrade.”

“I concur with her. Surely, the other members will feel the same as us.”

Munakata looked at Youichi and Matsuri’s faces, and then glimpsed at Reiji. His glance was machine-like, impossible to fathom. —In the few days he moved

together with him, Reiji noticed that he never once looked at Shiika with that gaze.

“Give me some time. Three days is enough.”

Munakata’s tone of voice was simply flat, without any undulations.

“Until then, let us let *Snow* make a decision. I’ve only just realised that now, but the number one question was whether the girl herself has the will to do so.”

“Huh? What are you saying, Munakata-san. When did anyone agree to that? The one to make a decision is us, Mushibane!”

“*Halen*, pass us the aforementioned documents.”

Munakata looked at Matsuri, causing her to look somewhat hesitant. But, Munakata only returned with a ‘I’m counting on you’, and she reluctantly held one hand up.

A small round insect climbed up her thin, white finger. The insect spread its wings and flew, landing in the space near the entrance.

“.....!”

The insect made a *bikibiki* sound as it expanded on the spot, transforming into a huge monster that filled up the space of the passageway. It’s scraggy metallic carapace resembled stone or maybe metal, reflecting light giving it a rainbow-coloured shimmer. It had unsuitably short legs for movement, and a mouthpiece that stretched like gum which wriggled in a creepy manner. The large monster toppled the decorative plants and umbrella stand, as well as causing the dresser caught between the wall and it to crack.

“She is *Halensis*. Her Mushi is capable to changing its body composition into that of any solid objects it has consumed. If needed, it can assume the molecular structure of what it had ingested before previously.”

Before Munakata even finished his explanation, the Mushi which resembled a Ground beetle spat out an object from its mouthpiece. Matsuri tore off the fibrous thread wrapped around the object and retrieved a silver attaché case.

Matsuri placed the case roughly on the table and opened it. She then retrieved a stack of papers tens of centimetres thick from within.

“These are the information about the Mushitsuki and collaborators of Mushibane. In addition to that, although there isn’t much, there’s also the data on the members of the SEPB we’ve identified. *Snow*, *Aijisupa*, I want you to drill this into your head, in three days.”

“Eh.....”

Shiika looked down on the thick documents with a dazed look.

“Well, this is also something like a ceremony. Although this hardly allows us to evaluate your abilities to much extent, in addition, I do not think our allies would not be convinced with just this. But, wouldn’t it be boring for you to just laze around like this anyway?”

“Erm..... err.....”

“In this three days, I will do all I can to try to persuade our allies. That’s why, *Snow*, I want you to think deeply about it, about whether you have the resolution to be the leader of Mushibane. Back in Ouka City, I had not clearly verified your will.”

With that, Munakata stood up. The huge Ground beetle returned to its original small size, and Youichi and Matsuri left the living room.

“*Aijisupa*, I still have some words with you. Can you come with me outside?”

“.....”

Reiji breathed out a sigh and stood up wordlessly.

Youichi and Matsuri left the suite, followed by Munakata with Reiji in tow.

“Erm, Munakata-san.”

Shiika called him to a stop.

“—Is there something you do not understand?”

Munakata halted, but he did not turn around to look at Shiika.

Shiika questioned him resolutely while still seated on the sofa, her hands clenched together on her knees and lightly biting her lips.

“What does Munakata-san think about me?”

“.....I detest you.”

After a short silence, he replied in a low voice. A single strand of white hair drooped over his forehead.

“*Sinica* and *Halen* said that they detest *Aijisupa*. But, you are the one I detest the most. Despite having as much power as Rina—no, your power is even greater than hers, yet you did not do anything. The one who watched as Rina died was none other than you.”

Shiika tightened the grip on her hands. Her eyes revealing a look of being shaken, but she immediately raised her head with a frail smile.

“I see, that was what I had thought. Thank you very much for telling that to me honestly.....”

“But, when I saw you in Ouka City, I understood. About what went through Rina’s mind and why she said you were her friend..... and also, why you are the only one who could save us.”

“.....Eh?”

“However, it’s not so easy to cut off our feelings. I seek your understanding for that.”

Leaving those words, Munakata walked towards the entrance with a fast pace.

“.....”

Leaving the surprised Shiika behind, Reiji followed Munakata.

Passing through the door, he found the previous two who left waiting in the corridor. But, Reiji grasped Munakata’s shoulder in front of the door.

“What is it?”

“You just said you knew, didn’t you.”

He unconsciously strengthened his grip on the suit.

“Rina said that that girl possessed something that neither Rina nor I have. Do you know just what that is?”

“Of course, I have not lived all these years longer than you guys for nothing.

—*Halen, Sinica*, come here and listen to what I have to say as well.”

This guy.....

Reiji’s face twisted. Judging by Munakata’s attitude, it was clear that he did not intend to tell him anything more than what was necessary. —Because, that was the most effective method of making Reiji stay here.

Indeed, Reiji could not leave Shiika’s side just yet. That is until he fully understands the meaning behind Rina’s final request.

“*Aijisupa*. You said that there were some people tailing us ever since Ouka City. I want you to tell us what are those people. You can at least listen to a request like this, right?”

Youichi and Matsuri stood nearby, while Munakata looked at Reiji.

“.....It’s a woman.”

Reiji said frankly. Even though he disliked his attitude, he had no reasons to oppose him. Since he was requested without being forced, it was meaningless to reject him.

“To be more accurate, it was something with the figure of a woman. When it realised that I had detected it, its figure would vanish immediately. I only caught the figure of a slim body and long hair in the instance I saw it. It was already following us all the time from when we were moving around our hiding spots in Ouka City.”

“Did you notice anything else?”

“I can’t guarantee that it was human.”

“.....What was that?”

“Do you know of anyone who can chase after a moving car with their body alone? At least, I don’t.”

The colour of their faces except for Reiji changed.

“I see. Since you have no interest in Mushitsuki, you may not have known. But, that feat may be possible for a Mushitsuki of the Fusion type..... In any case, it seems like there is a need to hold an emergency meeting of the

executives.”

“There’s also the possibility of this guy lying to us.”

“There’s no chance of that. He is only staying around by *Snow*’s side. He has no need nor reason to lie to us.”

Making that declaration, Munakata turned around to face Reiji.

“Thank you for sharing this with us. —By the way, *Aijisupa*. I have prepared a suite for you separate from *Snow* but.....”

“No need for that.”

“I know that this might not seem to be a problem to you, but.”

Having been told that, Reiji realised a little late what Munakata was trying to get at.

“You are worried that I would do something to that kid.....?”

“I have already mentioned earlier that her age is the same as yours, even if it does not look that way..... Well, just be careful not to ruin her mood. If you do not want to die, that is.”

For the first time, Munakata was grinning, causing Reiji to scowl at him.

“You dirty old man.”

“You are saying that? —Let’s go, *Sinica, Halen*.”

Seemingly not understanding that it was a joke, Youichi and Matsuri seemed to be shocked at Munakata’s smiling face. Pulling along the two were stunned, Munakata headed for the elevator at the end of the corridor.

“.....*Tch*.”

What a shrewd person, Reiji thought, clicking his tongue before returning into the suite.

Shiika was looking into the air absentmindedly, seemingly thinking of something. However, she regained her senses right away and gazed at the attaché case filled with bundles of papers.

“.....”

The figure of her being intimidated by the thickness of the stack of papers made her look like a child about to confront his disliked green peppers. Looking at her, Reiji sighed lethargically.

.....Is she really the one you were talking about, that Anmoto Shiika?

Inquiring his deceased friend, Reiji returned to the sofa by the window side. With nothing to do in particular, he stretched out his legs and closed his eyes.

“E-erm..... *Aijisupa-san*.”

Shiika called out timidly.

“It seems like we need to memorise this in three days.....”

“For something like that, one hour is enough.”

Silence descended in the room. The stunned look of the girl clearly floated into his mind even when he closed his eyes.

“O-one hour.....?”

As Reiji gradually fell into slumber, the voice of Shiika muttering, ‘One hour..... One hour.....’, repeated over and over in his ears.

1.04 Chiharu Part 2

Stopping her bicycle in front of Urban Dome, Chiharu widened her eyes at the scene.

“Uwaaah, did an earthquake or a typhoon passed by here?”

Large chunks of ground were gouged out in front of the passage leading into Urban Dome. A large hole was opened up into the wall of the tower, as if a bulldozer had rammed its way through. If a natural disaster like what Chiharu said herself had happened, there was no way that she would not know living so close to this area.

Her surroundings were already wrapped in darkness. As she had left the dome late in the night yesterday, she could not tell what the condition was like in the complete darkness.

“Maybe the construction work has resumed? If that’s the case, perhaps they’re redoing the pavement.”

After locking her bicycle, she walked towards the dome.

The entrance to the dome was the same as yesterday, unlocked, and she entered unhindered. Chiharu walked across the floor while humming, and ascended the halted escalator.

Although the outsides have been reduced to rubbles mysteriously, the paradise in the lounge of the second floor was unchanged.

As were the verdant trees standing in the darkness of the night.

Similarly, the soil that looked as soft as a bed was untouched.

And also—.

“I’ve come again. So as to meet with you.”

Similar to yesterday, the long-haired girl was lying on her side. Her arms and legs were folded like that of a foetus, looking like she was very snugly and cosily sleeping.

—How nostalgic.

Once again, a strange sensation welled up in Chiharu.

Chiharu did not recognise the face of the girl which looked like that of a princess of some fairy-tale. However, she can't erase the sense of nostalgia that she inexplicably felt.

Chiharu could somehow guess the reason for it.

"There are a lot of things that I want to ask you..... but, once I see your sleeping face, I just can't get myself to wake you up."

With a smile, Chiharu laid down in the paradise matching the girl face to face. Turning around 180 degrees, Chiharu laughed.

"You know. I..... do not have memories from beyond that of five years ago."

She muttered out this secret which she had never told anyone before apart from her mother.

"I have a feeling that the things I can't remember was something terribly bad. There's a feeling of guilt, one that was as if I had done something very horrible to someone else. I feel like I shouldn't achieve happiness for myself having forgotten about what I had done..... as though there are some things I have left undone. That's the kind of feeling I have."

Chiharu spoke out loud, as if to somebody.

Isn't that right? I have surely forgotten about what was most important.....

She turned her upwards facing head towards the girl.

"Hey, wouldn't you know who I am?"



Chiharu

Azusa

ねえ、キミはあたしが誰かを知ってるんじゃない？

But, the girl only breathed out softly.

With a soft smile, Chiharu let the drowsiness take over her body and closed her eyes.

2.00 The Others

The morning.

In a certain general hospital in Ouka City, a few people were walking down a passage in a quick pace.

From just one look at the building, one could not be able to tell the difference between the hospital and any ordinary building. But, if one were to take a closer look, they would be able to tell the slight differences the building had.

Unlike the central block which housed the outpatient clinic, the glass of the windows around the passageway connected to the west block was surrounded with a thin metal mesh. It was reinforced glass. As one looked even more carefully, they would find that the view through the glass was faintly distorted, possibly due to the considerable thickness of the glass.

As for the building itself, it seems that only the west block was constructed with asphalt of a different composition. Granulated concrete used for the sake of hardening was mixed into the walls, turning it into a colour more grey than white. In addition, the lightings that was installed on the ceilings most likely hid surveillance cameras. They were installed every ten metres and on every floor.

Ouka City Third Municipal General Hospital—although it has outpatient clinics typical of that of hospitals, only the west block was special.

It was the hospitalisation facility for the East Central Branch of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. It was one of the facilities built with the purpose of medical treatment for injuries sustained by the members of the East Central Branch during missions.

“She just woke up yesterday and still looks very languid. I already met her and had a few words with her, but her attending doctor wanted me to avoid having a long discussion with her.”

“It’s good as long as she’s alive. I have some things to ask her.”

“*Haah*, please don’t be so rough with her. Although *Nene-san*’s ability can

mend wounds, it can only recover what is in the range of her song. There's nothing she can do for large amounts of blood loss. I think her limbs are also in a somewhat numb condition."

The ones walking down the passageway was a woman in her early twenties and a boy in his mid-teens.

"Where's that *Nene*? Is she still in Ouka City?"

The boy was walking half a step ahead of the woman. He was wearing a blazer, probably the uniform of some school. His face was plain, lacking any particular features other than the plaster on his cheek. Likewise, he had a medium build that was within the average range.

"No way."

As for the woman, she was holding onto a large stack of documents in her arms with a sociable smile on her face. Although the shape of her face was not bad, the reasons that people who passed by her would turn to look back were probably due to her hair and her suit. Her bed hair which was not combed was standing up, furthermore, a portion of her shirt was hanging out from her belt. Looking closer, one would find that her spectacles was crooked too.

"There's no way that that is the case, isn't it. She was immediately taken back by the Central Headquarters, very swiftly too in fact. If it was possible, I would have wanted her to take a look at the rest of the patients in the East Central Branch, but it seems that one person was already the limit. *Ahaha*."

Laughing frivolously, the woman—acting Director of the East Central Branch, Goroumaru Touko said so.

"It's futile for you to expect anything with my level of abilities. When word of the outburst the other day against the Vice-director reached the ears of the audit committee, I got a salary reduction! Now, I wouldn't say anything extra anymore, that sure scared me. Ah! Listen to this, Daisuke-san! The loan for my beloved car, the Beetle is almost fully repaid!"

"Aah, of course. I did not have any expectations of you though..... Please try to put in at least some effort, Touko-san."

The one who said so with a sigh as he placed his hand on his forehead was

Kusuriya Daisuke. He was a member of the East Central Branch, at the same time, he was also one of the highest ranked Mushitsuki, the Rank 1 Blaze class Mushitsuki known as *Kakkou*.

“So? Who was the one being healed? As expected.....”

“Yes, it was Haji-senpai.”

There was a slight gloom behind Touko’s smile.

Haji Keigo. He was the young Branch Director of the East Central Branch. After sustaining a serious injury last year during the fight against Mushibane in Hashiba City which was under the jurisdiction of the East Central Branch, he had been in a coma since.

Daisuke’s expression turned sharp as well.

“How was it?”

“.....There wasn’t any change. His wound has more or less been healed, now we only need to wait for him to regain consciousness..... He’s in the special ward on the third floor, shall we visit him on our way back—was what I wanted to suggest, but.”

“?”

“Haji-senpai’s sister..... Senri-san has been by his side the whole time. Furthermore, Akatsuki-san is together with her today. Wouldn’t it be, erm, bad for you guys to bump into each other now.....”

Haji Senri. She was Haji Keigo’s biological sister, and was a Rank 3 Irregular class Mushitsuki. Previously being classified as a Secret class due to presenting an unknown risk, she was reclassified as an Irregular class after demonstrating a certain degree of control over her power. According to documents submitted by the Central Headquarters, there may be plans to classify her as Blaze class in the near future, although that is yet to be confirmed. There have also been words that the Central Headquarters may retract that.

Ogata Akatsuki referred to another person who is a Rank 2 Blaze class member. He was Senri friend, and also held a deep hatred for Daisuke since the past.

—.....

The East Central Branch was supposed to have weakened due to the retirement of Haji Keigo, but they were currently steadily stabilising their position. There were no doubts about that.

Daisuke and Touko exited the passageway, arriving at the west block.

After walking a bit more, they reached a room on the second floor. It was a single-person room, but it was a general room completely lacking anything apart from the necessities. The windows were completely open, causing the curtains to flutter.

“Good day, hello. How’s your condition, *Karasu-san*?”

Touko opened the door and entered, carefreely greeting out loud. Daisuke too entered the room.

“Feels so-so, acting Director-san”

A girl with long hair and a grown-up appearance greeted her with a smile in her unique wording. Lying down on the bed, faint burn scars could be seen peeping through her bangs. Her complexion was slightly pale, but one could tell from her expression that she was exceedingly lively. She was not even using the intravenous drip lying in the corner of the room.

She was an unranked member of Central Headquarters codenamed *Karasu*, Shirakashi Ubuki.

“Didn’t I tell you to call me Ubuki? Cause I hate that codename.”

“Ah, sure. Then, I wouldn’t mind if you called me Touko too. *Ahaha*, since my actual status is nothing but a salary leech.”

“*Ahaha*. You’re so interesting, Touko-san.”

“This isn’t a situation for us to be exchanging pleasantries, Touko-san.....”

Seeing the boy standing at the side sighing with a worn-out look, Ubuki smiled at him.

“Hmm? Who’re you? Making that expression would be a waste of your cute face, you know?”

“Leave me alone.”

“Ah, our introductions are a bit late. This is *Kakkou-san*. I’m sorry to do this while you have just woken up recently, but he has something to discuss with you—what’s the matter, Ubuki-san?”

Touko tilted her head.

The smile had disappeared from Ubuki’s face and her eyes were opened wide.

“*Aha..... Ahaha*, that’s a bad joke, Touko-tan. This child is *Kakkou*? The *Kakkou* that I saw before was—”

“Whoever I am is not important. Let’s get down to things quickly.”

About to lose his patience, Daisuke glared at Ubuki who was lying on the bed. His visage turned sharp unlike before, causing Ubuki to frown.

“That voice..... certainly, that belongs to *Kakkou*. I saw how he struck down other Mushitsuki like as if he was clearing the trash. Just hearing that voice made me nauseous.”

“N-now, now, don’t say that. Despite how he looks, *Kakkou-san* is actually pretty kind—”

“You saw the contents of the disk?”

Interrupting Touko’s words, Daisuke cut straight to the point.

“Don’t get us wrong, we’re not shielding a useless unranked trash like you out of sympathy or anything. You better tell us honestly what you know if you know what’s good for you.”

“*Kakkou-san.....* you just ruined my follow-up for you though.....”

Ubuki returned a threatening glare to Daisuke.

“Yuu-tan should’ve entrusted it to you. You didn’t watch it?”

“Only till the middle. There was a strange laboratory..... it was being used to experiment on the resurrection of the Fallen. It seems that the experiment was a success, and two people were resurrected.”

“.....Can you openly say that sort of things here?”

“Ah, it’s okay. This ward and the premises are currently being patrolled by a team led by *Kabuto-san*. Of course, the room has been thoroughly checked clear of wiretaps.”

“One of the ones resurrected was *Centipede*. And the other was most likely.....”

“If what Daisuke-san heard was true, that would overturn the fundamental facts we knew about the Mushitsuki. Till now, Shiika-san—*Fuyuhotaru* was the only exception, which led to her being chased by all organisations. However, from now on, that would no longer be the case.....?”

Listening to Daisuke and Touko’s exchange, Ubuki sneered at them.

“So, the resurrection succeeded. That’s what I thought so at the start too. Seeing how those who were turned into Fallen but still had to undergo that horrible treatment, I was so angry I stopped watching halfway. —However, there was a continuation of that. Before I returned it to Yuu-tan, I was curious after all and watched the continuation.....”

“.....The continuation?”

“That was not an experiment to resurrect the Fallen. After all, that was..... the two that returned were..... **they were not human.**”

Daisuke and Touko’s countenance changed immediately.

“W-what do you mean? That they were not human.....”

At Touko’s further questioning, Ubuki did not respond. It did not seem like she was keeping quiet on purpose, as a look of fear was clearly displayed on her face.

When she finally started to speak again, her voice was quivering.

“Those dark eyes..... that did not belong to humans. There was the sound of a bell..... and the two’s mouth opened, speaking in a disgusting voice..... ‘Thy two vessels who seek thee king..... lend thy thee body’.....”

“.....!”

The one who was rendered speechless was Daisuke.

“The sound of a bell?”

Surprisingly, Touko was calm. She put her index finger and her thumb onto her chin and thought.

“It can’t be..... *Shinpu*? There was a voice saying, ‘Dioresutoi’s fragment’, in the recording, right. As far as *Kakkou-san* has determined, Dioresutoi should have been *Shinpu*’s true name. However, why would that appear in Central Headquarters base.....”

Ubuki may have been frightened from remembering that scene, as she held her hands together tightly without speaking.

.....Di-o-re-su-to-i—.

She had unquestionably saw Touko forming that name with her lips. In addition, that that was *Shinpu*’s true name.

She burned that name into her memories.

“.....! Touko-san!”

All of a sudden, Daisuke covered Touko’s mouth. And with his other hand, he grabbed Ubuki’s shoulders and brought her close to him.

“*Kakkou-san*?”

“W-what are you doing, you pervert.”

Daisuke hardened his expression, brought the other two’s faces close to the wall and said something to them.

After hearing him out, the other two nodded their heads.

—.....

The secret conversation between the three ended promptly.

“Yes, I understand. But, will *Kakkou-san* be okay by yourself?”

“I too want to go out and fly.”

“You’ll just be a burden. The injured should just rest obediently.”

“S-see what I told you? Isn’t he kind? His words may be tough, but he is actually watching out for you—”

“I have no intentions of listening to your words. I’m just going out to return what was ‘lent’ to me. My limbs may be a bit numb, but flying is not a problem at all.”

“*Hmph*, suits yourself.”

“E-erm, the two of you, please get along together..... after all you are both Fusion types.....”

The three of them looked just like they were casually having an idle chat. However, two small shadows appeared all of a sudden above their heads. —.....?

They were small insects.

One of it was a green *Kakkou* insect with very long antennas.

And the other was a black Raven dragonfly whose wings was vibrating.

And then, in the next moment—.

“.....!”

Kusuriya Daisuke looked in **this** direction.

“S-shit.....! C-cancel assimilation.....!”

The ward’s window, the exterior of the hospital, the townscape of Ouka City—the telescoped view she had till then was being retracted consecutively.

“*Kuu*..... I need to get out of here quickly.....!”

On the rooftop of a building a few kilometres away from the hospital, *Konoha*, who was spying on the ward, hurriedly tried to retract her Mushi.

Sandwiched between two leaves, a large goggling eye wriggled. A long appendage connected the goggles mounted on *Konoha*’s head to the centre of a leaf.

I was discovered.....? T-that’s impossible..... from such a long distance..... though it’s true that light will reflect off my Mushi’s eye when it is focusing on something, that can’t possibly—.

The last scene she saw using her Mushi’s ability was that of Daisuke and Ubuki

fusing with their Mushi and jumping out of the window. She clearly saw the scene of Daisuke landing on the ground with his strengthened legs and wings sprouting out of Ubuki's back and she accelerated into the skies.

“.....!”

Looking in the direction of the hospital with her bare eye, a black spot was heading towards this direction.

It was Ubuki.

There were no longer any doubts about it. Those two people were heading towards here.

M-monster.....! How was he able to notice me from that distance.....? It was just as *Ouru* said..... he is far too different from the other Mushitsuki.....!

She raised the goggles onto her forehead, her other hand grabbing onto her Mushi. The large Mushi that resembled a Leaf beetle adhered to the side of the building, sliding down the building with *Konoha* on board.

Once her feet touched the ground, the Mushi blended into the scenery of the surroundings.

Searching and tailing enemies under any conditions, as well as manipulating the refractive index of light to camouflage itself was the ability of *Konoha's* Mushi. Footage captured by the Mushi can be digitised and sent to *Konoha's* goggles. It's camouflage ability was able to be extended to *Konoha* herself, allowing her figure to disappear, the problem was that the movement of the Mushi was extremely slow.

She could foresee the arrival of the East Central Branch agents if she continued to remain at this position now that she had been discovered. Even if she disguised herself, the risk of being discovered was high. She judged that her priority should be to withdraw from this spot immediately.

“*Haah.....! Haah.....!*”

Konoha had not come to Ouka City for a mission by the Central Headquarters. Obviously, there was no support. She couldn't even wear the SEPB's coat, but that was a good decision on hindsight. Once she came out of the back alley into

the shopping district, it would be possible for her to conceal amongst the general public.

Konoha ran while gasping for breath, knocking over the polyethylene buckets in the back alley. Just as she turned around the corner which led to the fence, her legs stopped.

“!”

“*Tah-dah!* This is the end of the line.”

Across the alley, a girl with wings on her back was waiting.

It was Shirakashi Ubuki in inpatient clothing. With black patterns on her face resembling a tattoo, she grinned towards *Konoha*.

She’s fast—.

It had only around one minute since she was discovered. If she flew here in a straight line, she must have been flying at a speed of around sixty kilometres per hour.

“.....*Tch.*”

Konoha turned to her right and tried to return to the alley. Running with her full speed, she ran in the opposite direction.

“It’s-the-same-here.”

Ubuki landed from the sky, obstructing her way.

Konoha’s face distorted, and she headed down the remaining passage.

A boulevard with pedestrians could be seen in front of *Konoha* who was running. But, Ubuki got in front of her before she could reach as expected.

“Will you just give up already?”

“.....Don’t underestimate me..... *Karasu*.....”

Konoha glared at Ubuki in irritation. Her Mushi hid its outline and came by her side swiftly. She did not have much confidence in her combat ability, but she did not think that she would lose to Shirakashi Ubuki.

The figure of the green Leaf beetle suddenly appeared and slid towards

Ubuki.

“Don’t forget that I’m Rank 4 Blaze class……!”

“Kyaa, Konoha-tan is angry. How scary~”

With a smile on her face, Ubuki readily jumped into the sky. She had evaded the ramming blow of the Leaf beetle, but now the path to the boulevard was clear.

Konoha stepped off the ground, aiming for the boulevard.

Konoha tried to dash out of the back alley, heading towards the commotion of the crowd. But—.

“—Don’t move.”



A hard sensation was pressed onto the temple of her forehead.

“.....!”

Before she could leave the alley, a single boy appeared from shadow of the building.

The spine-chilling solid object that was pressed onto *Konoha's* forehead was Kusuriya Daisuke's large-calibre automatic handgun. Similar to Ubuki, a green pattern covered his face as he spoke.

“If you make any suspicious movements, I'll blow off your head. Don't tell me that you have some naïve thoughts that *Kakkou* doesn't kill people?”

The boy's cold gaze and chilling voice caused *Konoha's* throat to dry up. There was not a shred of mercy in his voice; it was truly a pronouncement from a demon.

.....Putting aside *Karasu*, even *Kakkou* managed to rush here.....? Just how fast is he..... n-no, more importantly, how did he manage to contact *Karasu* and corner me here—.

Daisuke instantaneously grabbed *Konoha's* lapels and threw her into the dark alley with all his strength.

“.....*Kuu*.....!”

Thrown into the deserted alley, when *Konoha* raised her head, she was faced with the barrel of the handgun. Ubuki landed next to Daisuke who was pointing the handgun at her.

“Well, I'll take back the statement that you were useless. Looks like you are at least capable of stalling for time.”

“Are your eyes just for show? Can't you see that I purposely incited this girl to head here by predicting your movements.”

“No, that's wrong. I predicted your movements and came here.”

Konoha widened her eyes.

.....These people..... didn't prepare any cues beforehand.....?

She finally understood why did Vice-director Miguruma of the Central

Headquarters and *Ouru*, in other words Konomura Chami, viewed *Kakkou* and the East Central Branch specially.

Kakkou and *Karasu*..... in addition to *Kaguya* and *Himiko* as well as *Kabuto*..... although their ranked members were small in numbers compared to the other central areas, it was not a problem to them..... this branch, could possibly already have regained the strength of their prime.....?

A classic car came through the entrance of the alley into the view of the stunned *Konoha*. If she remembered correctly, that was a Beetle made overseas.

“Wew, I so surprised when the two of you jumped out of the window. Oh my, is that person the one who was spying on us? She looks pretty cute. I had thought they would be more tough-looking.”

“So, it’s only one person. Guess there wasn’t any need for me to come then.”

A youth alighted the car together with Goroumaru Touko and approached them. He was *Kabuto*, dressed in the full equipment of the East Central Branch with a black coat and goggles. If she recalled correctly, *Kabuto* was a Rank 6 Blaze class member.

“Touko-san. This one may be a diversion. How’s the hospital?”

Still keeping the barrel of the handgun to *Konoha*’s forehead, Daisuke questioned. Touko replied coolly.

“Akatsuki-san and Senri-san has moved to the rooftop and are on high alert keeping a lookout. This is the first time Senri-san is participating in an actual battle, but Akatsuki-san alone should be more than enough. With those two’s powers, any Mushitsuki within a hundred metres would almost certainly be annihilated, *ahaha*.”

“Senri too?”

“The only one who received order was Akatsuki-san actually. Senri-san voluntarily offered to help. Before we reached here, she had used her ability, which at this point is able to confirm the presence of Mushitsuki, to verify that there were no one in the premises and contacted us.”

“.....I see.”

Daisuke could be seen biting the end of his lips for only a second. He immediately resumed his pointed glare at *Konoha*.

“So, who are you? From that white goggles, you must be from the Central Headquarters. What were you doing on that rooftop.”

“.....”

“*Konoha* from the Central Headquarters, she is Rank 4 Blaze class.”

The one who answered was not *Konoha*, but rather Shirakashi Ubuki. Being one of the old-timers from the Central Headquarters, Ubuki knew her as one of the many people she knew about from the Central Headquarters.

“So this is *Konoha*. The one who was spying on me in Housawa Town.”

There was no surprise in Daisuke’s voice, as if he had already expected the existence of someone like *Konoha*.

“Why is it..... that you were able to detect me.....”

“At Housawa Town, some guy gave me a warning. From then, I kept vigilant about my surroundings.”

“.....”

“You still haven’t answered my question. What were you doing there?Did you hear what we were discussing?”

Daisuke’s voice went lower by a pitch. Immersed in his unforgiving gaze, *Konoha*’s shoulder began to shudder in fear.

Amongst the people there who held hardened expressions, the only one who still had a thoughtless and civil smile on her face, Touko, squat by the side of the girl.

“Let’s see here, based on the circumstantial evidence we have, we have a right to interrogate you. Having said that, I know that Central Headquarters’ system is unusually severe and moreover ruthless. You may be unable to tell us anything if you consider about your own self-protection. If Haji-senpai was here, he would have been able to carry out a leading interrogation splendidly,

but alas, those of us here do not have that talent in negotiation. What a bind.”

“That doesn’t matter. If she won’t speak now, we’ll just restrain her and force it out of her regardless of whether she want for it or not.”

“Praise, praise. This girl had caused me various troubles following me around previously. If it’s alright with you, wouldn’t you let me assist in the interrogation? Though it would no longer be an interrogation but a torture.”

“Have you made your preparations to be sent to Hashiba City?”

“Wait a minute, everyone. Please stop raising your bloodlusts. Look at what you’ve done, you’ve caused this girl to be this frightened.”

Konoha was trembling unstoppably.

She did not know what was the system in place like apart from the Central Headquarters. In the event that Central Headquarters captures a spy from the other branches, she did not know what kind of punishment did they enact, but —thinking about Miguruma Yaeko’s vice-like smile, she shivered in fear. It might be the case that they would actually be tortured. No, if the fact that she had been moving independently and was captured by the East Central Branch was revealed, her fate might’ve been the same even if she returned to Central Headquarters.

After remonstrating her subordinates, Touko cleared her throat with a *kohon*. She turned back to *Konoha*, revealing an unguarded and sociable smile.

“How about this, *Konoha-san*? We can make a deal here.”

“.....?”

“We will release you here as you are, and we would also not report nor protest to Central Headquarters. In other words, it’s like we ‘pretend nothing happened’.”

Including *Konoha*, the other members were all astonished.

“In return, you just answer our questions truthfully. Of course, we would keep your answers within our heads, and not reveal it to outside parties.How’s that? Isn’t this a fantastic idea? Shouldn’t you praise me, Daisuke-san! Aren’t I currently just like Haji-senpai right now?”

Looking at Touko frolicking in high spirits, *Konoha* frowned.

.....I heard that this person was an incompetent person, but I can't tell what's really in her mind..... There's no guarantees that these people would not report me to the Central Headquarters, but.....

"Do you think that you have any room for choice?"

Daisuke pressed the handgun onto her head, causing *Konoha* to groan. It was just as he said.

"Do you understand? Yes, she understood. Now then, here's the first question: Is there anyone else from the Central Headquarters apart from you around us or around the hospital?"

"....."

Konoha thought for a while before shaking her head. —As far as *Konoha* saw, there were no such people around.

"Thank you very much. Then, under whose order were you following did you to come here for?"

".....I was moving independently....."

She answered in a subdued voice.

"That's obviously a lie. Isn't it Central Headquarters orders?"

"But if that was the case, she's far too defenceless. If they wanted to infiltrate Ouka City, it would be unnatural for them not to send out at least a unit of a team. Especially for a surveillance type like her."

Ubuki's words were refuted by *Kabuto*. Daisuke was silent.

"*Hmm*..... I forgot to tell you this earlier, but don't even try to lie to us. The moment we find out that it's a lie, this deal is ineffective. After we report you to the Central Headquarters, no one can promise your safety."

"It's true....."

"I understand. Next, what's your motive?"

"....."

“What’s the matter?”

“.....I want to know the contents of the disk delivered to *Kakkou* by Ebina Yuu.....”

Everyone was silent.

—She deliberately spoke the truth. She thought that letting the Central Headquarters know of her own unauthorised movement would be the worst scenario. She must not let Central Headquarters have any ideas about her own actions.

“Why do you want to know? Vice-director Miguruma—Central Headquarters should have already known that he has already seen the contents of it. Are you interested not about whether or not he has seen it, but about the contents itself?”

“.....”

“Is there a personal reason for that?”

“.....Yes.”

“So that’s the case, I shall not ask then. Seems like you do not want to answer either.”

“You’re too trusting, Touko-san.”

Daisuke, who had been silent for a while, reproached Touko. However, Touko only smiled wryly with a, ‘You think so?’.

“The last question. You saw our figures in the hospital. —But, did you ‘heard’ our dialogue?”

Touko’s expression flipped, turning completely serious. Along with Daisuke, Ubuki and *Kabuto*’s sharp gaze, *Konoha* was surrounded from all four directions.

“.....No.....”

Konoha answered nervously with a gulp.

“From that distance..... did you think I could hear your voices.....?”

This was a lie.

Konoha spent most of her training on practicing how read lip movements. With her level of lip reading skills now, she is even able to convert the words she sees through her Mushi into voices.

Indeed, *Konoha* would continue to grow and mature even further, so as to fulfil her own objective. She could not let herself be obstructed at this kind of place.

.....If they knew that I heard the contents, they would not let me go..... I can't let myself be stopped here.....!

"*Konoha-san.*"

Touko asked calmly.

"Why do look like you are angered?"

".....Eh.....?"

Only when she was told did she realised that she had been biting her lips so hard that blood was oozing from her lips.

She wondered, when was it that the anger hidden in the deep recesses of her heart had swelled to such an extent that she began to display it unconsciously.

"—I understand. The questioning is over. Thank you for the trouble. Come now, let's return, Daisuke-san, everyone."

"....."

Right in front of *Konoha* who was still glowering, Touko and the rest really let her off and left. Starting from Daisuke, Ubuki and *Kabuto* also looked like they had some protest, but Touko swept it over with her friendly smile and they reluctantly retreated.

Left in the back alley all by herself, *Konoha* spent some time coming into terms with the flames of anger raging within herself.

2.01 The Others

“Touko-san.”

“*Ugh*..... Please don’t glare at me with that look, Daisuke-san.”

Seated in the front passenger seat of the Beetle, Daisuke was glaring at Touko who was in the driver’s seat with her face cramping.

The classic car which was made overseas was cramped. Ubuki and *Kabuto* who were sitting in the rear passenger seats looked like they were constricted. The vibrations of the engine were transmitted directly to the seats above and the car made a dull sound whenever Touko changed gear.

“The last answer was a lie. That *Konoha* person, somehow or another, managed to comprehend our conversation.”

“Yes, that seems to be the case.”

Touko swiftly agreed with Daisuke’s words, causing him to widen his eyes. The two people sitting at the back were speechless too.

“But, I think that her statement that it was not an order by the Central Headquarters was true. I doubt that the Central Headquarters or any other branches underestimate us East Central Branch so much that they would send out a lone girl. On the other hand, I do not think that that girl would do such a reckless thing by her own will. There must be someone in the shadows tugging at her strings.”

As the traffic light was about to turn red, the Beetle stopped before the pedestrian crossing.

From the direction they were headed to, they were not returning to the hospital but the base of the East Central Branch. As Ubuki was looking better than expected, maybe they were going to take down her testimony. Touko had mentioned that they were going to do that after she recovered.

“Then, who is the one manipulating *Konoha-san*? Is it Mushibane? Or perhaps Harukiyo?”

The traffic light turned green and the Beetle's engine started again.

Daisuke frowned his eyebrows.

"Harukiyo was part of the Central Headquarters' Annihilators, wasn't he? Didn't we find that out during Senri's escort mission."

"In fact, I met the real thing in person..... that person, does he look like someone who would obey another? Even if that whoever was the SEPB's Central Headquarters."

"....."

"I think that there is definitely some link between him and the Central Headquarters. But, if you were to ask if Central Headquarters have full reign over him..... I don't think that is the case. From his conversation with Daisuke-san, Harukiyo has some interest in other Rank 1 Mushitsuki. That's why, he only appears in cases related to the Rank 1s."

At Touko's explanation, Ubuki praised her, saying, 'You have a good head, Touko-san!'. That seemed to raise her mood, making her more loquacious.

"And regarding *Konoha-san*, there is one other possible pattern."

"?"

"That is, someone completely unrelated to both Mushibane and Harukiyo is interested in the contents of the disk. If this continues, the contents of the disk—if they continue to probe the link between the Central Headquarters and Mushitsuki, Central Headquarters will set their sights on them someday. Perhaps, this yet to be seen under-the-radar organisation will eventually come to clash with the Central Headquarters, yes."

"You only realised that now, Touko-san.....?"

".....After all, without there being somebody to cause turmoil in the Central Headquarters, there's nothing that we can do, isn't it? Just now, I was just thinking that wouldn't be good for us if only there would be someone who would go and stir things up with the Central Headquarters....."

"So, acting Director Goroumaru, you're saying that for the sake of letting that somebody go and make a splash, you decided to let *Konoha* go.Still, I guess

all this talk is just us taking a shot in the dark.”

At *Kabuto's* spot-on words, the four of them sighed.

2.02 Chiharu Part 3

Dispensing with the preliminaries, how is everything going?

It seems that I am still right at the height of youth as always.

Last night, I experienced a common page of youth as expected; I had a quarrel with my parents. —I had unintentionally fallen asleep at Urban Dome again, resulting in me returning home late. As to be expected, mother was livid. I'm glad that she was worried for me, but she may have been too overprotective..... Anyway, when I awoke, *that girl* was gone, I wonder why.

Hey, how are you over there?

Are you well?

“Senpai..... what are you in a daze for? *Aah!* Your organisation of the documents has not progressed at all!”

Only when Chiharu heard the voice of her junior did she awake from her ‘narrating quirk’, returning to the real world.

After lessons ended before noon, the usual four people gathered in the Student Council room.

Apart from Chiharu, there were the first-year pair of Tsushima Ayumu the secretary, and Noda Saori the accountant. The last was the second-year in charge of general affairs, Kanadome Naoki.

“Please do your work properly, Vice-chairman!”

“You’re wasting your efforts. Ayukawa’s concentration is practically non-existent. Her ability to take action being a different case.”

In contrast to Saori whose cheeks have swelled up, Naoki had a look of having already given up and was silently continuing on with his work.

Even Chiharu thought that Naoki’s words were on the spot. Chiharu could be distracted by anything, so long as it enters her sight. That’s why, if there was someone completely opposite from Chiharu—someone who thinks of

everything and always plans ahead, she felt like she would complement perfectly with them, no matter if they were just a first-year. Alas, there did not seem to be anyone like that around her.

“Fine, fine, I’m the type to move before thinking after all. That’s to say, my body moves by itself?”

“What are you doing as you say that, Ayukawa-senpai.....”

“From what I’m seeing, you are just distributing your portion of the work to all of us.....”

“How can you do that, Vice-chairman.....”

“I’m sorry, everyone. For being such a worthless Vice-chairman.”

As she pretended to be wipe her tears, Chiharu briskly distributed her portion of the work to the three’s stack. When she returned to her seat, she could hear the sigh of three person in unison. As if they did not even have the spirit to protest anymore, they wordlessly arranged the extra portion into their stacks. What a bunch of truly endearing companions, she thought.

Surely, these fun and warm days would continue on tomorrow and the day after that too. Ah, it’s already spring now. Once spring break arrives, perhaps I’ll go somewhere. All by myself to somewhere far—.

It was right at the moment when her ‘narrating quirk’ resumed.

“Noda!”

Suddenly, the door to the Student Council room was violently pushed open. Chiharu and the rest turned around with a startle.

“If it isn’t Ue-chan. Yo!”

It was a face Chiharu knew. He was the captain of the Swimming club known as Ueda.

Ueda ignored Chiharu who raised a hand enthusiastically, heading straight to Saori and grabbed her arm.

“I could see you from the window and so I came..... didn’t you say you were taking a break from club activities due to a cold! If that’s the case, why are you

here? Right before the sports meet and here you are slacking?”

“E-erm, err.....”

“Do you have any awareness of being a first-year regular? Hurry up and come with me! If you have the free time to waste here, come and practice!”

Facing Ueda who was forcefully trying to drag her away, Saori contracted. She looked as if she was petrified by his threatening attitude.

“W-wait a moment! Don’t get rough!”

“Oi, that’s our junior you are getting touchy with. You can’t just do whatever the hell as you please here.”

“Aa? This is a problem for our club activities, so shut up!”

Ayumu and Naoki stood up from their seats and glared at him.

A dangerous atmosphere came over the Student Council room in an instant.

However, there was still one person seated in her seat. It was Chiharu.

“Well, well, just calm down, Ue-chan. Your stormy face when you are angry is pretty scary, probably much more than you think so.”

“Don’t use Noda at a time like this, Ayukawa! Didn’t council activities ended last week!”

“I-it’s not like that, Vice-chairman didn’t—”

“Understood, *roger, okay*. Then, I shall first apologise to you. I’m sorry, Ue-chan, Noda-chan.”

When Chiharu apologised with some lamentation, Ueda was taken aback. His mouth which was about to yell back came to a shut. Ayumu and Naoki looked like they were about to protest, but Chiharu spoke before they could.

“I didn’t know that the sports meet was just arriving, but to make Noda-chan help out for our work was my failure at management. I’ve certainly caused some trouble to the Swimming club and Noda-chan.”

“T-that’s all because I didn’t say anything—”

“But, you still need to respect the will of the person herself. Why did Noda-

chan lied that she had a cold? Because she thought that if she said the truth, you wouldn't give her time off? What Ue-chan is doing right now is like saying, 'Just neglect the council's work!'."

Ueda looked as if he had some words stuck in his throat.

"Coming here even if it meant that she had to lie—see, doesn't that show that she has a sense of responsibility. She just wanted to clear up what's left of the council's work. Really, that's all."

Truthfully speaking, that was not the case. As far as Chiharu saw, Saori was not so much focusing on work as much as she was at the same year student seated next to her—That is, she was referring to the complicated thing known as a girl's feelings. Chiharu figured it was better left unsaid out of Saori's privacy.

"Being the case, Ue-chan, you need to apologise to Noda-chan."

"Why do I have to.....!"

"Yelling angrily at her and pulling her arm roughly—that's not what you call acceptable behaviour towards a junior, right. This has nothing to do club activities nor council work. You need to respect the will of the person herself no matter what. You see, there's something called motivation? She won't improve if you force her to practice."

"....."

"If you won't apologise, then please leave this place."

Chiharu smiled wryly at the silent Ueda.

"I understand that you are angry at my cute junior, but you need to cool your head a bit, Ue-chan. Don't worry, Noda-chan will be returning very soon."

The Student Council room was still. Ueda stared at Chiharu for a while in silence, and then took a deep breath to calm himself. He apologised to Saori with a, 'Come back quickly, okay', before leaving the room.

"E-erm..... Vice-chairman....."

"No problem, I have high hopes for you, Noda-chan. To think you were a regular for the sports meet?"

Standing up with a smile, Chiharu took Saori's portion of the documents. She then distributed the documents to her own together with Ayumu and Naoki's.

"We'll have to cheer you on too, right? I'm sure no one has any disagreements."

".....I have. It seems like Ayukawa-senpai's portion of the extra work is excessively small compared to ours."

"I'm sorry for being so useless."

"That's fine already."

Ayumu and Naoki showed their support with smiles and Chiharu faced Saori.

"Now then, we will split the rest equally amongst ourselves so hurry up and return to your club activities. Don't forget to apologise to Ue-chan properly too."

"I'm sorry..... and thank you."

"Thanks for your help so far. It's very much appreciated."

Following after Chiharu, the other two repeated, 'Much appreciated'. Saori bowed with a look of being moved to tears and replied, 'Thank you', before leaving the Student Council room.

"Now I feel kind of tired.Can I just nap for a while?"

"I'll hit you."

"But, it feels like something changed about you after all, Ayukawa-senpai."

Just before he resumed working, Ayumu looked at Chiharu as he spoke.

"What's with that, saying something rude all of a sudden. Are you at your rebellious period?"

"It's not that..... How to say it, you look like you're always in a daze, but when the necessity arises, you are calmer than anyone else. How do I say it, you seem adult-like..... that's not it either."

"From how I see it, it seems that Ayukawa has overcome quite a bit of difficulties thus far, despite how she looks though."

Listening to Naoki's joking remarks, Chiharu tilted her head.

"It looks like that to you? Am I actually not just an ordinary highschool girl?"

"Well, even if you ask us that..... wouldn't you know that yourself."

"I guess you're right. Why do I feel this way?"

.....What do think about this? Am I weird?

Directing that question at nobody in particular, Chiharu started sorting the documents.

—By the time the three of them finished up, the school building was already dyed in the orange shade of the evening sun.

As Ayumu and Naoki exited the school gates walking next to each other, Chiharu stopped her feet.

"Thank you guys very much for the trouble this half a year. You've really helped me out for lots of stuff. Thank you, the two of you."

Thanking them with a sweet smile, the two youths were startled. They looked at each other before smiling bashfully.

"No problem, it was fun. —Don't forget about our promise. When the new school term begins, let's assemble with these members again."

"Yep, it would be great if it's like that."

"See you."

"Thank you for your work!"

Waving her hand, Chiharu turned her back towards the school.

She hesitated about whether to head home first to put down her bag and change her clothes or not. But, contrary to the turmoil in her heart, her legs were headed straight for the town centre. It seems her body had already decided on her destination even before she did.

Humming along as she walked, she emerged at the sidewalk along the national highway which was led to the station. Shops lined the street including fast food restaurants, cafes and clothing stores.

There were all kinds of people walking about. It goes without saying, but all those people had all sorts of past as well as possessing a myriad of possibilities for their future.

Without breaking her hum, a slight smile formed on her face as she passed by the station.

—Strictly speaking, the memories that Chiharu lost were those of before she was twelve. It was around the time right before her mother married her stepfather. She could not remember a single thing before that.

Just what kind of life had she led up till then? Just who was her real father? And also, just what kind of child was Chiharu like?

She had posed all these questions to her mother before. Was that when she was still in middle school?

—There's no difference between now and then.

Her mother had ended the conversation with just this one line. At that time, her mother had a hardened expression, looking extremely sorrowful. Since then, Chiharu had never touched on the topic about her memories. Rather than to say that it was out of concern for her mother, it was more like she realised that her mother would never say anything about it to her.

Her mother was the one and only person who knows about her past, yet she refuses to speak about it.

That's why, Chiharu did not know a thing about her past at all.

Chiharu led an exceedingly ordinary and full life..... yet she was always bound by this groundless feeling of guilt.

Humming as she walked along, Chiharu start talking to a non-existent somebody.

This kind of thing is known as a trauma, right. I even went to search it up. I may have experienced a horrible shock for all I know. There were lots of examples of people with this condition after being mistreated when they were young written in books..... but, I don't think I'm like them. If you were to ask which am I, it seems more like I was the one to have done something to

somebody..... right? What do you think?

Before her stood a tower and a dome shimmering in silver light. She climbed over the fence which had a sign prohibiting the entry of unrelated personnel. It was right as she was about to enter the premises of 'URBAN'.

“!”

She saw the figure of a person in front of Urban Dome.

Her slender body was faltering as she walked in unsteady steps, her hair draped down. Her pale face coupled with shaky footsteps made her look like an apparition from a ghost story. If one saw her at night, they would definitely be creeped out.

This was the first time that Chiharu had seen her awake. She was the girl that Chiharu had seen sleeping in the forested paradise on the second floor lounge. Today too, Chiharu had come here to meet her.

“Is she..... heading out? Or perhaps she is returning?”

Chiharu hurriedly distance herself from the fence and hid in the shadow of a car parked by the roadside.

—.....Why do I feel the need to hide. But, well, my body had moved before I even realised.

Hiding herself like this, she made up some excuses in her heart.

Whether she discovered Chiharu or not, the girl continued with that wobbly footsteps and crossed the fence, heading in the direction of the station.

“This kinda feels like I’m going on an adventure. To shadow the mysterious beauty! That kind of feeling?”

Leaving the shadow of the car, she followed behind the girl.

Much unlike what she was saying earlier, what she was doing was far too crude to be called shadowing. If one turned around, they would clearly be able to see her. In the midst of her chase, she had even started to hum.

Chiharu and the girl walk with a fixed distance between them.

Not a single person turned around to look at the girl although she was only

wearing a thin piece of clothing for some reason. She seemed to be surrounded by a space that belong to another world, a space that segregated her from the crowd and the exhaust noise of cars on the street.

The girl stopped as she reached a roundabout near the station.

“.....?”

She lifted her head and looked upwards. The only things in her line of sight was the station, followed by the most luxurious hotel in Nishito City, the Nishito Imperial Hotel.

Looking at the side view of the face of the girl, there was a change. The mouth of the girl slowly curved into that of a smile—.

“Eh.....? What? How come?”

In an instant, the slender girl had disappeared into the crowd. When the pedestrians cleared from the spot, there was no one left there.

Chiharu ran to the spot where she last saw the girl, it was right next to the ticketing machine. She turned and looked around at the surroundings, but she could not see the figure of the girl anywhere.

“Did she enter the platform? When did she.....”

She stood there stunned for a moment, but the simmering curiosity and rebelliousness in her heart came to a boil.

“*Huhu*, I see. Is this a challenge directed towards me? Fine, the one you are challenging is this Ayukawa Chiharu. I, attendance number 23 of Class H of the Second Year of Nishito Sousei High School, Vice-chairman—former Vice-chairman of the Student Council accept your challenge!Eh, *uwaah!* I don’t have enough money. Not even sufficient to buy a ticket..... D-dang, if only I didn’t buy that roasted ginger set meal from the school cafeteria and settled for the curry udon instead.....!”

Leaning on the ticketing machine, she hung her head down crestfallen.

“E-erm.”

“All because of that aroma which piqued my interest. Now that I thought about it, that was the biggest culprit. How devious, the school cafeteria

aunty.....”

“Erm.....?”

Chiharu, who was beaten down by a sense of defeat, heard a reserved voice calling out to her. When she finally realised that and raised her tear-stricken face, a small-statured girl came into her view.

It was a girl around the age of a middle-schooler who had a red ribbon tied around one of her forelock and wore a dress which she looked good in. She had cute features that seemed to captivate the eyes, but even more so, Chiharu had a strange impression looking at her.

That even though she looks very fragile, she was in fact very strong—.

At one look, she might look like an upper-class *Lady* unknowing to pain and worldly matters, but in reality, she looked as if like a work of art that had been shaved and beaten at countless of times—indeed, one could feel a deep sense of composure from her.

“What’s the problem? If you’re lost, you should look for the station staff for help.”

“.....!”

Hearing Chiharu’s first sentence, the girl was shocked. After being stupefied for a moment, she came to her senses and held out a hand.

She was holding out a note of cash.

“Please use this.”

It seems that her soliloquy just now had been overheard. Chiharu scratched her head and sighed.

To be pitied on by a younger girl like this..... just what am I doing?

“Thank you. I’m happy for your gesture, but it’s not like I’m actually that troubled. How do I explain it, this is just something like a reckless act of youth? It’s like a, ‘if it doesn’t work out, okay, let’s give up and try again tomorrow’, kind of trouble.”

The girl stared at Chiharu in puzzlement and then burst into laughter.

“But, you look like you really want to go.”

Hearing this, Chiharu smiled wryly.

This child..... unexpectedly, her words hit the point.

“Yeah, I really want to go. Really, this is so troubling if I say so myself.”

With a smile, she accepted the note from the girl’s hand.

“You, what’s your name?”

“Ah..... it’s Anmoto Shiika.”

“Thank you. I’ll return this to you later.”

Chiharu put the money into the ticketing machine and chose the cheapest fare. Taking the ticket, she quickly passed through the gantry.

“Eh? Return it.....?”

She did not turn around even when she heard the girl’s bewildered voice.

She ran and weaved through the human traffic.

Yes, I really, absolutely want to know! Just who is the girl and why does she interest me so much! I want to know it so awfully much!

Breathing wildly, she searched for the figure of the girl.

However, she could not find the lightly dressed figure inside. Maybe she had already boarded a train, or perhaps, she did not even enter the station in the first place.

“That’s why, I can’t give up here.....”

Trying to control her breathing, she gave a smile.

“Okay, I’ll try again tomorrow!”

In front of Chiharu, a limited express train sped by.

2.03 The Others

With his hands in his pockets, Reiji looked up at the station and mused.

It was now the evening rush hour and the roundabout in front of the Nishito City station was congested. Buses and taxis were constantly passing through and pedestrians flooded the walkway as well. In front of the gantry, the area around the ticketing machine was crammed full of people too.

Teenage boys and girls were sitting on the guardrails that separated the roundabout and the sidewalk and were chatting happily or staring at their mobile phones. Similar to them, Reiji was sitting on the guardrail. He took out a cigarette packet from his pocket and held a cigarette to his lips. However, he did not light it.

—Listen to me, I want you to stay by the side of a certain girl.

In the past, the girl known as Tachibana Rina had said that to Reiji. That had been the very first and last thing that she had requested of him.

Since the moment he first met her in a nursery school in Akamaki City, the girl known as Rina already had the charm to attract people. There was always somebody gathered around that girl who had a cheery smile.

In contrast, Reiji did not have a single person which he could call a friend. As he did not feel lonely, he did not see the point of making friends either. It was around that time—that Reiji thought that there was surely something crucial missing from his heart ever since he was born.

“.....”

Reiji took his hand out of his pocket and clenched it into a fist as if he was grasping something. A white mist formed around his arm. A *pishii* sound like that of when a carbonated drink is opened rang out.

Smoke rised from the cigarette that he held in his mouth. —Before one even knew, Reiji’s cigarette had been lighted up. He returned his hand into his pocket.

—Since nursery school and primary school, he had been looking at the figure of Rina.

He had already forgotten who was it that had first called out to the other, except that it had surely begun from something small and insignificant. However, Rina was always at the places where Reiji went to, and the chance of Reiji being at the place where Rina was at was quite high.

From nursery school to primary school, Rina had been the popular person in class. The bright and kind her would always be surrounded by friends, yet whenever she was in a place where no one could see her, she would have a contemplative look.

It was probably around the time during the upper grades of primary school.

While Reiji was smoking alone on the rooftop, Rina came to him.

She would always approach Reiji whenever she wanted to take a breather. That was probably because there was never anybody around Reiji and that Reiji himself was always aloof. Whenever Rina wanted to be alone, she would come to his side. That's what he thought.

—Please give me one of that too.

—Nn.

—.....

—.....

—Hey, Reiji.

—Hmm?

—Do you know about..... Mushitsuki?

—Only rumours that those things feed on people's hopes and dreams to grow. I've also heard that they eat humans.

—Yea, mine was eaten by it. But, that was only mine. I don't think others eat humans though.....

That was the day that Rina became a Mushitsuki.

Listening to her speak about it indifferently, Reiji opened his mouth.

—You want my help?

—Nope, what I want was probably..... a punishment. I thought that if it was Reiji, then you would do so.

—You want me to kill you?

When he coolly asked that, Rina bit her lips with an anguished look. That was the first time that Reiji had seen her look like she was about to cry.

However, Rina only took an instant to conceal that face, immediately showing a smile again. She even told off Reiji about how smoking was bad for his health especially now when he was still a minor. In the end, she did not light the cigarette. She then left with a, 'See you'.

It seems like Reiji was the only one that Rina said farewell to. From that day on, she never attended that primary school again.

The next time they met was more than one year later.

On the way back from the local middle school, he happened to see Rina in the streets of Akamaki City. She was together with some youths of around the same age as Reiji whom he did not know. He could tell that they were most likely from other city as he had pretty much memorised the faces of the pedestrians he passed by on his way to and from school.

He had heard that Rina had been admitted to a middle school in Higano City next door through the arrangement of a certain person. But, she would occasionally come here to Akamaki City for some errands.

Having met Rina again since a while, he found that she was as beautiful as always. Furthermore, compared to the time when they were in primary school, her current smile was more lighthearted. He thought that she must have been doing something she liked.

—Seems like I've also become a Mushitsuki somehow or another.

When Reiji mentioned that casually, Rina was surprised. But, she immediately leaned forward and asked him what his dream was. It seems that to become a Mushitsuki, one must have a dream.

Reiji only tilted his head saying, 'I wonder'.

The *something* that had turned Reiji into a Mushitsuki had said some incomprehensible words to him. It was something about, ‘Thou shalt become the one to protect the king’.

Rina slumped her shoulders dumbfounded, but showed an odd smile right after.

—Are you alright?

Before they parted, Reiji asked that of Rina. He wondered if Rina understood what he was referring to. She was taken aback.

When Rina revealed a lonely smile, the youths around her were stunned.

—I’m still in the middle of a journey, but it hasn’t been going very well.

Just like in the past, Reiji asked if she wanted his help. But, Rina only smiled mischievously and stuck out her tongue at Reiji.

—Reiji really is..... really, it’s because you are always like that that you always cause me to waver. No, it mustn’t be anything but like this. Because we’re..... that’s why, even if it’s just Reiji alone, you must stay on ‘that’ side.

She said a bunch of things that Reiji did not understand at all.

—Fine, I’ll reserve a request from you first then. Someday, I’ll make such a huge request of you that you would definitely regret it. And that will be something that would shake up your entire life.

After that, he did not see Rina for quite a while. However, Reiji thought that Rina would undoubtedly appear in front of him unexpectedly again for sure

Reiji’s prediction was on the mark, and once again, she appeared before him right as he entered high school.

—I’m gonna head to Ouka City. I’ve been thinking about various things, but I’ve made up my mind now. There’s something I must do no matter what. I’ve finally found my dream.

At that time, Reiji had already received a recommendation to attend a local high school. It was just an ordinary high school as he did not have anything he wanted to do.

Reiji listened to Rina's words without speaking. He vaguely remembered and felt that there was something odd about the order. One should have a dream so as to become a Mushitsuki, but she was saying that she had just found her dream.

When Reiji asked if she was alright, Rina showed the exact same expression as she did in the past. It seems like she has yet to find a place where she can find peace.

The last time he heard Rina's voice was through the phone.

—You know. I might die tomorrow.

—.....

—That's why, I have a request for you.

—Fine. I'll listen to anything.

Reiji answered instantly. There was no falsehood in those words at all, he thought that he would anything that was within his power.

Rina probably knew that as well. That was something like an 'agreement' between the two of them.

—Are you okay with that? Don't regret later after blindly making a promise.

—I won't do that.

—I see. Just to be clear, this is not me getting even with you, okay? Didn't I say it before? It's because Reiji always cause me to be waver.

—Fine, just say it.

—.....Thank you.

—.....

—Listen to me, I want you to stay by the side of a certain girl. In the case that I fail in what I am going to do from now on..... I want you to watch over with your own eyes what that girl would do. She's my important friend.

—So, you're saying you want me to protect her? Is that for her sake?

—No, that's wrong. You just need to stay by her side. This is for the sake of

Reiji.

—My sake?

—I want Reiji to watch over that girl, Shiika. That girl has something that neither Reiji nor I have.

—I don't get what you're saying at all. This is your request? Something for the sake of myself?

—*Haah.....* As expected, you still have not noticed. You—no, more like the both of us.....

The girl known as Tachibana Rina was a strange person right till the very end.

She would come by the side of the always solitary Reiji who possessed nothing, just like a freshwater fish that swims to the surface of the water for a breather, leaving just a lonely smile before disappearing. Till the very end, Reiji still couldn't figure out her true intentions.

In the end, his relationship with Rina was a questionable and inseparable one.

But, the next day following his final exchange with Rina, he gave up attending school.

It was for the sake of finding out what the girl who he had an inseparable relationship with meant by 'getting even' with him.

“.....”

Several months had passed since Rina found her place of belonging.

When he visited Rina's family home, he was told that she had gone missing since a few years back. Even so, they had not made a report to the police to conduct a search. After combing through the middle schools in Higano City, he finally discovered the school which Rina went to. She had apparently gone to a certain Moira High School in a place known as Housawa Town.

However, that was just a pretence. Despite receiving the notice of enrolment as well as paying the tuition fees, she did not attend the school.

Reiji trusted her words and went to search through the high schools in Ouka City. He eventually found the public high school she attended, but he also heard

that she was missing there. He even got ahold of her classmates that were her friends, but they did not have any idea where she lived either. Being a public school, they had a tough policy on the privacy of their students and stubbornly refused to reveal Rina's address to Reiji. On the contrary, they seemed to readily accept her notice of absence from school.

Left with no choice, Reiji snuck into the school at night and stole a look at the student's personal information. Having found the location and visited it, he found that the name of the tenant of the room in a condominium did not even exist.

After that was just a use of force. Stealing the management documents from the landlord's house, and then checking out the tenant's bank account—just when he was doing all this, he was contacted by Munakata Kaiji.

Having had the intention of fishing out the relevant people, he had purposely acted flashily. Thus, he was not surprised when Munakata reached out to him. And then, when Munakata told him what happened to Rina after that, he remained unsurprised.

“.....”

As he smoked his cigarette, a girl with a small stature sat down next to him.

It was Shiika. —In the first place, the reason they came from the hotel to here in front of the station was because of her saying that she wanted a change of pace after being worn out from staring at the documents.

Shiika stared into Reiji's face intently. Being so close, she looked all the more childish.

“Hmm?”

“You are..... smoking the cigarette?”

“Can't you tell just by looking.”

“S-sorry.....”

Her face turned red and she hung her head. But, she seems to want to say something and kept stealing glances at Reiji's face.

It was not as if Reiji was trying to stare back at Shiika or intimidate her. It was

just that his normal gaze usually caused the other party to think that he was. It frequently happened that he would anger his addressee just by answering their question.

The two of them just continued to look at the hustle and bustle of the crowd in front of the station in silence. Taking a fleeting glimpse at Shiika, Reiji saw that she was enjoying herself just by gazing at the peaceful scenery. This was in contrast to when she was browsing through the documents in the hotel, where she had a look on her face like that of a puppy being cornered.

When Shiika noticed Reiji's gaze, she looked at his direction too. But, she seemed embarrassed from having their gaze met and she averted her eyes. watching her behaviour like this, Reiji felt a rare sense of irritation.

Rina..... is this person really your 'friend'?

He did not know if Rina noticed this herself, but she almost never called anyone her friend. For her who was constantly surrounded by others, she always referred to them by 'everyone' or 'those people'. After she moved to Higano City, she would often use the word, 'comrade'.

"E-erm, is *Aijisupa-san*....."

Shiika timidly spoke out in a voice that was being drowned out by the buzz of the people around them. It appears that she was not used to being around so many people.

Munakata had been the one to give him the name known as *Aijisupa*. The reason being that he was not used to being called by his name, Shirotani Reiji.

"You are Rina's childhood friend, right?"

".....I wonder. She was just someone I knew since young, an inseparable existence."

"From young..... What kind of child was Rina like when she was young?"

That was a question that Reiji had heard for the first time. Being labelled as an outsider by Mushibane, there was no one who had asked that of him. It was like they were trying to say that they knew Rina—or the girl known as *Ladybird* better than him.

“She was just a normal kid.”

He answered honestly. If he had said that to the Rina-worshipping bunch of Mushibane, would they have gotten angry?

“There are many things about her I do not know of either, but she was just like any other person.”

“I see.”

Shiika looked glad. It seems like she did not have any doubts about Reiji and Rina being childhood friends at all.

Reiji answering her question straightforwardly seems to have calmed her down, as her nervous face softened. The reason that they had not conversed much despite all the time they spent together was due to them not having a common topic.

“What kind of fellow was Rina?”

Reiji asked Shiika the same question back.

“When Rina was at Ouka City..... what kind of person was the one called *Ladybird* like?”

Shiika looked surprised but smiled right after. It was a reserved smile with only the corners of her eyes and lips slightly loosened, but it was very frank. Reiji could feel his little remaining irritation being washed away by her smile.

“She was just an ordinary girl.”

“I see.”

“Did you know? Rina had someone she liked.”

“I see.”

“She also had someone she hated too.”

“I see.”

“She had also cried in front of me.”

“.....I see.”

Just these few sentences all revealed a side of Rina which Reiji never knew.

“Thank you.”

Those words reflexively came out of his mouth. Shiika only looked at him in puzzlement.

“Surely, you were the only one that she had shown that to.”

“.....Yes.”

Shiika nodded and hung her head. She raised her right hand once to rub her eye.

“The only thing that Rina requested of me was to stay by your side.”

Reiji said.

“For me to watch over what you would do. That’s all. She did not intend for me to help you. Even if you die, that would have just been your ending.”

“Yes.”

When Shiika raised her face, her eyes were slightly red, but there was a lighthearted smile too.

Reiji narrowed his eyes and spat out the cigarette. With the sound of *bushii*, the cigarette falling through the air contracted as if it was squeezed, before turning into dust and scattering. Shiika widened her eyes in astonishment.

“Don’t you want to request for my help?”

“Eh?”

Reiji gazed at Shiika who asked a question in return. Her perplexed face was replaced by one of hesitation.

“If you say that you want me to help, then I guess I’ll help out.”

“.....”

“I would do anything that you ask of me, seeing as I have nothing to do anyway. But, she did not request for my help even at the very end.What are you going to do? If you want my help, then I’ll help?”

Reiji and Shiika stared at each other. The noise from the streets seemed annoyingly loud then.

Knowing that Reiji was waiting for an answer, Shiika reveal a thin smile.

“Because I am still lost..... what am I going to do from now on, what should I do from now on, even I have no idea.”

—That was all.

A genuine doubt sprouted in Reiji’s mind.

Rina..... Is the reason she did not ask me for help the same as yours?

“!”

Feeling a chill down his back, Reiji's gaze turned sharp. The commotion in front of the station felt very distant all of a sudden, as if the surrounding area had been transported into a different world.

So, it appears again..... and it’s close—.

It was the presence that had appeared around Shiika’s vicinity at every turn that followed them for Ouka City to here in Nishito City. The air turned stagnant and it felt like a sticky gaze had set its sights on Shiika and Reiji.

Moving only his eyes, he kept on high alert at the surroundings.

It was not in the station beyond the gantry. It was not at the street left and right of them either. He looked at the roundabout behind, turning his head around just very slightly. But, he couldn’t find any suspicious figures there either.

“Is something the matter?”

He looked at Shiika who was asking him with a unknowing look—and saw it beyond her shoulder, in front of the ticketing machine.

For merely an instant.

A girl with fluttering long hair was looking in their direction with a loose smile hanging on her face. The eyes of the girl who was wearing a thin cloth that looked like that of a hospital garb was a deep black that seemed to suck one into darkness.

“.....”

After her figure was swallowed into the crowd, she disappeared.

It's really a monster..... but, compared to the time at Ouka City, its presence seems much thinner now. It must have been worn out from the journey to here, or perhaps it's being on guard..... looks like it's not planning to make a move yet though. Perhaps, 'observing' is the best it can do before it rejuvenates its strength.....

Shiika had said that she did not need his help. He did not know just what kind of person was she that a monster like that would be chasing her. As long as she did not request for his help, even if she were to be killed by that monster just like that, that would just be the conclusion of the girl known as Anmoto Shiika.

However, something doesn't feel right.

From their conversation, Shiika was undeniably Rina's friend. But, unlike Rina, that girl was far too defenceless.

"Just how long do you plan to dawdle around here for?"

"Eh?"

"Aren't you being chased? Don't you think that you are being too conspicuous staying here?"

Shiika jolted in understanding after being warned in a roundabout manner. Getting flustered all of a sudden, she got down from the guardrail.

"Y-you're right. Somehow, it seems like I was feeling relieved....."

"Relieved? Why is that so?"

"I-I wonder why is that.....? Maybe it's because *Aijisupa-san* is here."

"Didn't I say that I wouldn't help. Since you did not ask for it."

"O-oh, right. My apologies."

Reiji could feel his irritation rising again.

Is she an idiot.....?

Sighing out, it seems like it was time for him to return to the hotel with Shiika.

"Fine, the one you are challenging is this Ayukawa Chiharu. I, attendance number 23 of Class H of the Second Year of Nishito Sousei High School, Vice-chairman—former Vice-chairman of the Student Council accept your challenge!

.....Eh, *uwaah!* I don't have enough money. Not even sufficient to buy a ticket..... D-dang, if only I didn't buy that roasted ginger set meal from the school cafeteria and settled for the curry udon instead.....!"

The sight of a girl leaning on the ticketing machine and grumbling came into his view. Shiika too seemed to have noticed the girl. They looked at the girl who was called Ayukawa Chiharu.

Wearing a casquette on her head, she looked to be around the same age as Reiji. The figure of her writhing her body exaggeratingly was extremely eye-catching. Her sense of presence was so strong such that she would probably draw attention even if she were to just stand there quietly.

It appears that Chiharu could not buy a ticket as she did not have enough money. It wasn't any particularly uncommon occurrence. Reiji started to walk towards the hotel.

"Erm..... *Aijisupa-san.*"

Reiji turned around. Shiika was pulling onto his clothes. He understood what she wanted to do even without her saying anything and thrust his hand into his pocket.

"I don't really mind. Do as you want."

He took out a note from his wallet and passed it to Shiika. If she wanted something to do something like that, he didn't mind helping her out.

"Thank you very much."

Shiika smiled sweetly and ran towards Chiharu's side.

"E-erm."

"All because of that aroma which piqued my interest. Now that I thought about it, that was the biggest culprit. How devious, the school cafeteria aunty....."

"Erm.....?"

"What's the problem? If you're lost, you should look for the station staff for help."

“Please use this.”

“Thank you. I’m happy for your gesture, but it’s not like I’m actually that troubled. How do I explain it, this is just something like a reckless act of youth? It’s like a, ‘if it doesn’t work out, okay, let’s give up and try again tomorrow’, kind of trouble.”

“But, you look like you really want to go.”

“Yeah, I really want to go. Really, this is so troubling if I say so myself.”

“You, what’s your name?”

“Ah..... it’s Anmoto Shiika.”

Reiji was gobsmacked.

As I thought, she’s really an idiotEven though she is being pursued, she still used her real name—.

“Thank you. I’ll return this to you later.”

“Eh? Return it.....?”

Leaving Shiika standing behind, Chiharu rushed through the gantry.

“Come on, let’s go. Idiot.”

“O-okay. Eh..... idiot.....?”

With Shiika in tow, Reiji began to walk back to the hotel.

Curious about the girl whom she exchanged sparse words with, Shiika turned back to look at the station countless of times.

3.00 Chami Part 2

“.....”

The view of a commonplace residential area could be seen outside the window.

Sitting on the chair hugging one of her knee which her chin was resting on, Chami gazed listlessly at Ayukawa Chiharu's house. Of course, she took notice to sit in a position such that her figure could not be seen from the outside.

There were only sporadic pedestrians walking along the street between Chami's apartment and the Ayukawa house.

Apart from the faces of the pedestrians, the scenery remained unchanged.

The only sounds she heard was the soft *kicchin* coming from the vibration of the refrigerator and the sound of the engine of the occasional cars passing by.

The original mission that Chami received from the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau was the observation of the girl known as Ayukawa Chiharu. No reason nor length of mission was given to her.

However, Chami had actually been moving about covertly, laying the groundworks so as to take over the SEPB and dominate all of the Mushitsuki. The one which was monitoring Chiharu was in fact a white cat which had been the very first target of the effect of Chami's Mushi.

Chami had named that cat as *Owl*, while her own codename was *Ouru*. —Why was it that Chami had christened that cat with the same name as she had at that time?

Owl had understood Chami's command and faithfully carried out the mission. The stray cat, *Owl*, seemed to have acknowledged Chami as its master. Chami was the only person whom it had become emotionally attached to. Now that she thought about it, just what kind of emotion did Chami's ability amplified in *Owl*.....

—It was only recently that Chami felt the true strength hidden behind her

ability.

An ability which amplified emotions, she thought that was all to it.

But, that shrewdness of *Owl*, as well as the *Konoha*'s shocking rate of development—either of which were something that went beyond common sense.

Could it be that Chami's ability had drawn out their latent abilities, or perhaps..... did the intensification of their emotions resulted in the manifestation of some other kind of effect?

".....Good job holding out for these five years."

Murmuring softly, Chami smiled.

That goes for me too, right—.

She added in her heart.

While Chami surreptitiously laid down her preparations, all she had thought about was dominating those who had looked down on her.

In her place, *Owl* had shouldered her original mission all this time.

Without anybody's knowledge nor realisation, the two owls had been working behind the scenes all along.

"Good grief..... what a shitty life."

Just as Chami treated *Owl* as a pawn, she herself was no more than a pawn of the organisation.

This time, Chami's pawn, *Owl* had died.

Who knows if Chami would be the one to die next.

Be it having her dream devoured completely by her Mushi, or during one of the organisation's mission.

However, she would never let that happen.

"Who is the one at the 'heart' of the Mushitsuki right now? *Kakkou*? *Fuyuhotaru*? Harukiyo? The Central Headquarters?All of them can go eat shit and die. I am going turn the tides on you people who would not even look

at me. I'll show you guys how I reach the heart of it before any of you. And then, I would claim it all for myself."

That was Chami's one and only purpose.

Outside the window, Ayukawa Chiharu was walking. She opened the door to her home and disappeared inside.

At the same time, the door leading to the room Chami was in opened with a creak.

"Chami."

A girl with a taciturn aura entered. She was wearing a dress which matched her long black hair. With skin as white as that of traditional Japanese dolls and thin-slit eyes, she was the splitting image of her elder sister.

Sugitsu Aya. She was Chami's classmate as well as her pawn and a Mushitsuki. Being the point of contact for *Owl* all these time, she took off her shoes and entered the room with familiar movements.

"How was it?"

Chami turned around while still seated on the chair, facing Aya who looked up while sitting on the floor.

"I don't think there was any particular issue. After finishing her Student Council work, she walked down the streets..... she seemed to intend to enter into 'URBAN', but immediately turned back. She then entered the station once, but came out after a while."

"How are there no issues? Her turning back the moment she reached 'URBAN'? Entering the station and coming out right after? Aren't all those suspicious behaviours."

"But, she was humming to herself all the while, without even a shred of anxiousness. It seems to me like she was just taking a stroll."

".....Did she look like she came into contact with anyone?"

"Nobody in particular..... Ah, she was talking to a girl in front of the station. But, it seems like that was just the girl randomly lending her money to buy a ticket."

“Hmm.”

Chami placed her hand on her chin and pondered.

She had already heard from *Konoha* the contents of the talk between Goroumaru Touko and *Kakkou*—the executives of the East Central Branch in Ouka City.

Looks like there are already movements in the central area.

The Central Headquarters are involved in some shady actions as she had expected. Judging by the contents of the disk, it can be deduced that the Headquarters are experimenting on the resurrection of the Fallen. However, that seems to be a failure. The two Fallen who were brought back were ‘not human’. One of them, *Centipede*, had already been defeated by *Kasuou* and was reverted to a Fallen and recaptured.

The East Central Branch too seems to be planning to do something. Putting aside *Kakkou*, it is also a matter of time before the other high-ranking members, *Kaguya* and *Himiko* displayed their strength.

On an unrelated note, the West Central Branch is still adopting the ‘none of my business’ attitude as always, and has no results worth mentioning other than equipment development. The South Central Branch has teams actively patrolling the areas within their jurisdiction, but ignores events occurring outside of them. It is the same as always here too. Seeing as the Branch director obediently does as the Head director dictates, it is safe to say that the North Central Branch is one with the Headquarters.

The key to what would happen from now onwards would be the confrontation between the Central Headquarters and the East Central Branch here in the heartland. Just a tiny spark would be sufficient to ignite the fuse to this high-tension state and cause an explosion between the two parties. If that happens, Chami would be able to move freely.

What would be able to trigger conflict between the Central Headquarters and the East Central Branch? Chami initially had some expectations of Mushibane, but her hopes were completely dashed. Just by losing their leader, *Ladybird*, the resistance had lost their chain of command and was currently just a disorderly mob.

“Seems like I have no choice but to light the kindle by myself directly.”

She muttered to herself.

There were no doubts that the Central Headquarters of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau knew deeply about the Mushitsuki. Dioresutoi—they knew about the true name of *Shinpu*, but it was a mystery why they did not reveal this fact. If she wants to rule over the Mushitsuki, she would definitely have to probe into the secrets of the Central Headquarters.

It would be far too dangerous for Chami to investigate the Central Headquarters directly. The role of lowering the guard of the Central Headquarters would have to be the East Central Branch now that Mushibane has retired from the field.

The key that would lead to a clash between Central and East, that would be—.

“*Fuyuhotaru*..... in addition, I need to find the other resurrectee that escaped from the Central Headquarters. I can’t possibly do that if I’m stuck here.”

The one at the heart of the battles surrounding the Mushitsuki was indubitably *Fuyuhotaru*.

That Rank 1 Secret class Mushitsuki, the one and only person who ‘truly’ resurrected from the Fallen status. Chami must find her and turn her into one of her pawns no matter what. And then, she would cause an internal strife to arise in the SEPB using that girl and find an opportunity to subdue *Kakkou* as her pawn.The escapee who ‘isn’t human’ could also serve as a fine substitute for this plan.

“Tomorrow, I would personally shadow Ayukawa Chiharu. If nothing happens, I would completely abandon this mission. After all, nothing happened during these five years, and nothing else would happen from now onwards.”

“.....”

“I no longer have any expectations of Mushibane, but let me hear about them for the last time. Were there any movements inside of Mushibane?”

The reason Chami turned Aya into her pawn was to obtain information about the ongoings of Mushibane, as Aya’s elder sister was one of the executives of

Mushibane.

“Elder sister seems to be trying to distance me from Mushibane recently..... Something seemed to have happen earlier, but she didn’t tell me anything about it. However, she looks slightly flurried.”

“Oh, really. It must’ve been something trifle if it occurred here in the countryside. Well, just keep a lookout for things.”

In response to Aya’s words, Chami gave a noncommittal nod.

“.....Are you going leave here? Have I run out of use?”

Aya, who had been answering questions in a mechanical tone all this while, changed her expression all of a sudden. Biting her lips, she clutched onto the hem of Chami’s clothes.

A red smoke that only Chami could see rised up from Aya’s body. Slowly forming into the shape of a queen bee, it was a portion of Chami’s Mushi that was residing in Aya’s body.

“Although I would be absent from here for a while, I would be back in no time. As long as I belong to this branch, my base would be here in Nishito City.”

The emotion that was buried within Aya’s heart was that of ‘loneliness’. This type of people who suppress their emotions cannot take too much of a shock, thus, Chami told her as such to prevent her from going berserk. Chami faked a smile while feeling bothersome inside.

“So..... if I do not return, that probably means that I have died. At that time, you give up on me too.”

Those were not words of concern for Aya. It was the truth, something that could happen to her anytime. That was what it meant to investigate the mystery of the Mushitsuki.

Ouru—what an ironic codename that fitted Chami perfectly, with her ability that could only be used for disinformation, with never the need for her to show her face. An owl never shows itself, one can only hear it hoot. And when it swoops down on its prey, probably none would see it as well.

“This mission shall end tomorrow.Having entrusted this mission to her all

along, I don't even feel any sentimentalism for it.”

She smiled.

Chami was determined to abandon this mission. This mission to observe Ayukawa Chiharu probably did not matter to the SEPB either. After assigning this mission to a Rank 10 member such as Chami, they then neglected it for five years. In fact, even if she did not monitor her and just continued sending reports, the upper echelon would not have realised it anyway.

“!”

The door to the room was opened violently with a loud noise.

Chami and Aya turned around in alarm.

A tall young man stood there. With long hair and an unshaven face, he stared in Chami's direction. He was wearing a combined black suit which she had never seen before and was clutching his torso with his right hand that was stained dark red—copious amount of blood had dried up and hardened. Looking more closely, there were signs of injuries on his face covered by his hair.



The man entered the room with his shoes while breathing heavily.

“Who are you? Did you get the wrong room?”

“Rank 10 member of the Southwest Branch, *Ouru*, right.....”

At his words, Chami’s face turned stern.

“.....I am *Kanata*, Rank 3 Blaze class member of the Central Headquarters. I’ll be using this place as a hideout for a while..... I have already spoken with the Branch director of the Southwest Branch.”

Chami’s heart almost leapt out when she heard the words, Central Headquarters. Thoughts that her scheme had been discovered pass through her head for a moment, but she realised that that was not the case.

“I have applied first aid myself..... but it was inadequate. Bring me some medical ointment and food..... immediately.”

The man spoke one-sidedly and headed for the bed.

“.....”

Chami clicked her tongue in secret.

A troublesome character barged in right as she was about to take some concrete actions. He looks like he was in the middle of some mission, but to indicate her ‘servitude’ to the organisation, she has no choice but to abide by his orders for the time being—.

“I was careless..... who would have thought that it would possess such an ability. In addition, there was that incomprehensible cat. It acted as if it was trying to protect something.....”

Her heart throbbed with a *dokun*.

There were deep cuts carved into the face of the man who was teetering with his hands on the wall. A long gash extended from his ear till his neck alongside multiple other wounds. All of that indicated as if he had been attacked by some animal or something.

A revelation reached Chami, passing along the thread of logic through her mind.

The man was chasing after something and came to Nishito City. He had pursued the something all the way to 'URBAN', coincidentally coming across a white cat and fought against it. He, who was probably a Mushitsuki, chased the cat all the way to the rooftop where it—.

“.....A cat.....?”

“That has nothing to do with you. Bring some medicine and food. Right now.....”

Chami's heartbeat raced even faster.

He must have possessed quite a bit of strength to be part of the Central Headquarters, not to mention he was Rank 3. If she earned his gratitude here, surely that would be of use in the future.

“.....”

“What's the matter..... didn't you hear me.....?”

She tightened her grip around her hand which was already gathered into a fist.

I see..... so that's the case. You were the one who did that to her..... well, it's not like I have any particular grievance about that. After all, she was just one of my pawns out of many, and she had bad luck, that's all.

—*Kuhuu*.

She seemed to have heard the sound of *Owl* laughing.

But, you know.....

“.....Don't kid me.”

Chami's mouth started to move by itself.

She is mine, whether be it her life or her existence—.

“It's not even my mission, so why do I have to shelter someone like you.”

Her face twisted and she spat out hatefully.

.....I'm not so nice as to listen to others obediently when my stuff has been seized from me. What belongs to me shall only be used for my sake alone!

Chami's head had cooled to below freezing. She calmly devised up a plan to dispose of the man and make it such that nothing had happened.

However, that was an impossibility. Being Rank 3 Blaze class, that meant that he was someone capable of commanding people in a large-scale battle. There was not even an off-chance of her winning against him.

"Just go along and die alone somewhere, you scumbag."

Kanata glared at Chami for a second through his fringe. And then, he grabbed Chami's shoulder powerfully and slammed her against the wall.

"Ugh.....!"

"My rank is higher than yours. Even if you say you don't want to, I can make you obey my orders right now."

Even as Chami grimaced in pain, she still returned a cold glare to *Kanata*.

"*Haa*, you can beat me up if that's what you want. But then, I would not let it end there, I'll make sure to drag you down to hell along with me."

"Is that so."

Kanata slowly raised his arm.

Chami resigned to the fact that her scheme would end here. If he had obtained the permission of the Branch director, that would mean that sheltering him had become her official mission. And for Chami who rejected that, that signified that she was a rebel and that she would be detained. If she missed this opportunity of while *Fuyuhotaru* was on the run, the chances of a minor character like Chami breaking into the heart of the Mushitsuki would be dashed.

However, she thought that this was fine. —Chami was dreadfully enraged.

".....!"

As Chami was prepared to accept the man's beating, what she saw behind him made her widen her eyes.

"A-Aya.....?"

"Let go of that hand!"

Aya had circled around to behind the man before they even realised. She was pointing a kitchen knife that appeared out of nowhere against the nape of his neck.

Y-you shouldn't have been that kind of character!Or rather, that guy's a Rank 3 Blaze class? How did you even circle around behind this kind of guy?

The blood running through her concussed head ran cold. Although Aya was a member of the Mushibane, Chami never thought that with her strength, she was capable of making such movements.

"What are you doing to my friend here."

".....*Hmm.*"

The man sneered and casually swung his arms backwards.

".....!"

Aya was sent flying powerlessly against the wall. She seemed to have hit her head and collapsed limply onto the floor.

"Who is that.....?"

".....She's just a pawn. You've probably heard about my ability from the people on top anyway, right?"

"She had combat training?"

"How could she possibly have received that kind of thing."

It seems that even the man was a bit shaken from having his back so easily circled around and he looked down at Aya in silence.

However, Chami was the one who was genuinely surprised.

What in the world was with her movement just now.....? Could it possibly be because of the effect of my Mushi? What's happening right now.....? Aya's unpredicted action was a surprise, but the worst case of her bringing out her Mushi had been avoided. If Aya had brought out her Mushi instead of just using the knife, she would have unquestionably been killed by *Kanata*.

"I'll say it once again, cooperate with me. There won't be a third time."

"....."

Being glared at by *Kanata*, Chami regained her composure.

There were no benefits from rebelling out right now. She currently had no evidence that this man had killed one of her pawns.

The course of action that would be most advantageous to Chami would be to turn *Kanata* into one of her pawns. If she could get her hands on a Rank 3 Blaze class Mushitsuki, that would surely prove to be a great addition to her fighting power. —But, in the first place, it would not be easy to exploit an opening in a combatant with this level of strength.

.....Indeed, this is a chance. There is no need to get so worked up over a trivial emotion as such.

Persuading herself like this, Chami started to speak.

“I’ll cooperate. But, it pisses me off that you said it was none of my business.”

“.....”

“Having come from Central Headquarters alone, you don’t know a thing about these streets, right? I’ll prepare some medicine and food for you. Ah, I’ll bring a pair of scissors and a shaver as well. Looking at that squalid state of you is pretty unbearable.”

“.....”

“You get me? To put it bluntly, I’m also trying to earn some points like this. It’s not like you can freely gather information with your body like this, right? I’ll go out and take action, and then you can finish it up. You can complete your mission, and I get to have some good word with Headquarters, maybe they might even send me back to the central area if it goes well.”

“.....I won’t make any deals. As I said, this is an order.”

“Can you even consider this a deal? To someone like you, is a small fry member like me trying to earn some points even an issue? In exchange, wouldn’t it be good for you to gain the merits of having a pawn to move around freely for you?”

Chami and *Kanata* stared off at each other as if to probe what was the other scheming.

In contrast to the amicable smile plastered on her face, Chami was scorning him inside of her heart.

.....*Ha!* In the end, you would only be thinking of something of this level, isn't it? With her ability, it would be dangerous to show an opening..... but, she's only Rank 10, right? Even if I was careless, it's impossible for me to get done in by a small fry like her. In that case, I might as well use what I can right now..... the success of the mission is the top priority. —Isn't it something like that!

“How about it? Isn't the completion of the mission your top priority?”

“.....No.”

The man shook his head.

“I'll do it myself..... It couldn't possibly have moved far from these streets..... most of its strength had already been used up..... that's why, it didn't deal the final blow to me..... It should be resting its body nearby somewhere..... and also, it seems to be chasing after something..... I will finish the job myself..... This is a battle bestowed upon myself.....”

He muttered in delirium and leaned onto the bed. Perhaps it was due to his blood loss being too great or because of his empty stomach, he looked fairly weak. On the other hand, his mental state seemed pretty keen, showing no signs of any opening.

—I see. So, he's that kind of guy.

Although his reply was different from what she expected, she saw through his true nature and grinned.

“Fine, do as you like then. I'll provide you with the minimum level of assistance, but I won't do anything more.Come on, wake up already, Aya.”

Chami kicked the unconscious Aya and she let out some groans before regaining consciousness.

“This girl will be helping you out. Don't treat her too roughly, okay. Despite how she is, she is still my stuff. The next time you do something to her..... you might find poison in your food.”

“.....”

“That’s just a joke, why don’t you laugh.”

At Chami’s words telling him to laugh, *Kanata* knitted his eyebrows suddenly. Chami noted his reaction and said.

“What’s that, you can’t laugh? You can easily learn that from others by watching them. For example..... how about a laughing cat.”

“.....”

The man glared at Chami with a severe look. There was a murderous intent in his eyes, as if his nemesis was right in front of him.

So, it’s like that. *Heh*, as I thought. I see—.

Chami was convinced. She looked down on the man with a chilly gaze.

“You bastard.....”

“Well then, all the best to you. —Let’s go, Aya. Let’s go get Mr big-shot from the Central Headquarters his desired meal. We’re going shopping.”

Shaking off *Kanata’s* gaze, Chami dragged Aya alongside her out of the apartment.

But, she stopped her feet the next moment and turned around.

“Hey, *Kanata-san*. Do you know about Ayukawa Chiharu?”

“.....Ayu..... kawa?”

The man creased his eyebrows in doubt. It was not an act, he did not have anything to do with Ayukawa Chiharu.

Chami made some changes to her plan.

She would first investigate into *Kanata’s* mission before tying up the loose ends with Chiharu’s observation mission. Also, she would take the opportunity to plant her Mushi within the man without fail.

By now, she was positive about it.

Kanata had been chasing after something and came all the way to ‘URBAN’. There, he came into conflict with *Owl*. Chami has no idea as to what was *Kanata* pursuing, but *Owl* judged that Chiharu would come into danger. And so—*Owl*

protected Chiharu. At the same time, that meant that she protected Chami's mission.

"Aya..... why did you try to protect me?"

She turned to Aya and asked, but she did not reply. However, she looked back at Chami with unhesitating eyes.

".....Every last one of you are just my pawns, yet you're all becoming so impertinent."

Despite muttering out in resignation, a smile formed on Chami's face.

"Very well, I shall make use of you thoroughly. No matter if it is your life or your existence..... I'll make use of it all for my shitty dream!"

And with that, I'll make even someone like me stand at the centre of the stage —.

That was precisely Chami's dream.

The dream that she had taken a step forward with together with a cat on that day five years ago.

3.01 The Others

The condominium that Kusuriya Daisuke lived in was located in a residential area close to the town centre of Ouka City.

The entrance to the 16-storeys building was preceded by a classical gate constructed from bricks. A Beetle was parked in front of the hand-pushed double gate.

The sun had already set and the surroundings were dark.

Daisuke alighted from the front passenger seat and spoke into the car.

“Thank you for sending me back, Touko-san.”

“Not at all, now let me go park my car in the parking lot first.”

“Sure.Huh?”

“Ah, it’s dangerous if you don’t close the door.”

“Eh? Y-yes.”

Doing as he told and closing the door, the Beetle then drove to the parking lot located at the side of the building. After parking at the visitor’s lot, Touko alighted from the driver’s seat. She then opened the bonnet and retrieved a large plastic bag from within.

Carrying the plastic bag, Touko came by the side of Daisuke who stood there motionlessly.

“Sorry for the wait. Let’s get going.”

“‘Let’s get going’, you say..... but where to?”

“*Ahaha*, you don’t have to act dumb. Where else could it possibly be other than Daisuke-san’s apartment.”

“*Huh?* W-why is that? I didn’t hear you say anything about that.”

Daisuke flusteredly chased after Touko who swiftly entered the entrance.

A mailbox could be seen after pushing open the door. One could tell even

without looking that the mailbox for Daisuke's unit was empty. Entering further, there was an automatic door.

“Daisuke-san, are you eating properly? Your complexion looks poor recently. That's why, today, I am here to ascertain the physical condition of my subordinate as your superior, so I thought I would prepare a nutritious meal for you to recover your spirit. Erm, can you open the door quickly? This is unexpectedly heavy, erm, faster.....”

Walking to the automatic door with teetering steps, Touko looked turned around to look at Daisuke with an imploring look. He could hear from the bumping sound that the bag was mostly filled with cans of beer.

Daisuke sighed in resignation and took the bag from Touko. He scanned the cardkey and authenticated the retinal scan at the side of the door.

The automatic door opened.

“Sounds more like you want to vent your complaints at me while drunk, Touko-san.....”

“W-what are you saying! You know, even I have some self-awareness of being the acting Branch director..... Eh, *aah!* I think I left the number for the proxy driver back at the office.....!”

“Your intent to get drunk is showing plainly though..... And what nutritious meal, it's just some Italian takeaways. And you even bought beer, I thought for sure that you were going eat by yourself at home.”

“Let's not speak so distantly, just accompany me for a while, please? Kei-chan from the same year wouldn't hang out with me anymore ever since she was transferred to the human resource department.”

Carrying the bag of beer, Daisuke entered the elevator. Touko too followed behind with a friendly smile.

They alighted on the fifth floor and continued down the aisle.

“Looks like Senri has not returned.”

He walked passed an unlit apartment and stopped in front of the door next to it.

“Eh? Senri-chan?”

“This is Haji’s apartment, Senri’s living in it. And, mine is just right next door. Akatsuki would come by every day to send Senri to and fro.”

“Eh..... *Eh?* Haji-senpai lived here? I heard that Senri-chan was staying at Haji-senpai’s place, but I thought for sure that she was stay in a dormitory.”

Most of the staffs of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau lived in the dormitories provided for the public administration. The housing expenses were cheap and more importantly, there was a firm security system.

This condominium that Daisuke stayed in too belonged to the nation, despite being private management on papers. There were disguised surveillance cameras installed in the entrance and elevator, and there was a squad of security guard on standby 24-hours in another location. Not to mention, the wall of the aisle was especially high to prevent people from spying on which floor and unit did anyone lived in from the outside.

“.....Ah!”

“Eh? What’s the matter, Touko-san?”

“Daisuke-san, I just realised a grave fact..... T-this is the first time I am entering a boy’s apartment.....!”

Daisuke ignored the flabbergasted Touko and inserted the card into the reader. The entrance opened and lit up.

“So, you have never gone out with any guys before, huh, Touko-san.....”

“Eh? Ah, no! Err, if you’re talking about dates, then I have gone on many, but..... please keep it a secret for me, ‘kay?”

Leaving behind the smiling 23 years-old superior, Daisuke entered the living room. When he switched on the lights, the bland state of the room could be seen. A LCD television was placed on a rack made from pipes and faced the sofa and table.

Touko seemed to have some troubles removing her shoes and entered a bit later.

“It sure is a simple room. If one ask whether this is just like Daisuke-san, then

it sure is just like what you would do.*Ufufu*, now it's Daisuke-san's turn to confess whether or not there were any girls that have entered this room?"

"Too bad, Senri came here before countless times. Because she kept nagging at me to clean up, wouldn't you say it's pretty clean now?"

"Looks like your relationship is very good. If only you would clear up your misunderstanding with Akatsuki-san too—"

Touko's words stopped there abruptly. Putting the bag of beer on the table and turning around, he saw Touko looking at a photograph placed on top of the rack.

It was a picture of Daisuke of when he was younger. A petite girl clamped onto his neck with one arm and flashed the 'V' sign. In contrast, there were two other girls on both of his sides who were looking embarrassed.

"That wasn't a misunderstanding, that about Rina."

"....."

"Isn't this photo a violation of regulations?"

Daisuke turned the photo frame down and feigned ignorance. Mushitsuki belonging to the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau were prohibited from leaving behind records of their appearance beyond what was necessary.

But, Touko only chuckled. It was a different smile from her usual sociable one.

"I've heard from Haji-senpai. They are the aforementioned..... Daisuke-san's friends, right?"

"....."

"You don't have photos of your family?"

"....."

"I'm sorry. Looks like I was prying too much into your personal life."

Touko grinned serenely. Looking at her unreserved face, the sides of Daisuke's lips rised.

Touko walked towards the rack and sat the photo frame upright again.

“The thing known as a person’s memories are very mysterious. We can remember the big events and happenings very clearly, yet those ordinary days that link them together are considerably hard to remember. For example, the boring route back home every day, or what you spoke with your friend about today et cetera.....”

A smile could be seen from the side view of Touko’s face as she gazed at the photograph.

Daisuke looked on silently.

“I do not know what kind of shape does Daisuke-san’s past form, but don’t you think that it would be alright for you to recall those carefree day for just a bit? It’s exactly those carefree days which were the fun times. Those happy times which made you think you met them for the sake of that time..... If you can think about it that way, I’m sure that looking back at the past would not be backwards-looking, I think.”

Daisuke returned a smile to Touko who turned back to him. She was probably worried about Daisuke, acting in this way unlike the usual her. Or, could it be that her current self was Touko’s true persona? Either way, it was impossible to surmise her true colours, in a different meaning from what Haji Keigo suggested.

“.....I’m going to take a shower. Because I met Touko-san right after my practise, I didn’t even have time to wash off my sweat there.”

With those words, he headed for the shower room.

Daisuke spent the whole day today on combat practice which he had not done for a while. There was a mountain of things for him to do, but the top priority would be for him to collect information from the outside. The movements of the Central Headquarters, news about *Fuyuhotaru*—Shiika, and also the developments in the various powers, he must look into all these and find a way to handle each situation. The only thing Daisuke can do now would be to prepare his mind and body such that he is ready to move out whenever.

The voice of Touko, which was completely different from just now, came from the living room.

“Then, I shall take care of the preparations for the banquet. Ah, don’t worry about it, I definitely wouldn’t peek at you. Also, Daisuke-san, is any brand of beer fine with you?”

“I don’t even know where to start retorting from, but I’ll just leave it to you, Touko-san.”

Daisuke took off his clothes and entered the bathroom, showering from his head down.

Water droplets gushing from the showerhead pelted his face. It then flowed down to his feet and streamed into the drain.

“.....”

Looking down on the hot water droplets dripping from his chin, he recollected the past.

The people he had met with so far, and had parted with.

Daisuke would recall all of their faces every night. However, what always appeared were their angry faces, or of them crying, which eventually faded away.

Their cries and tears reproached Daisuke endlessly. The one who had forced them to make those faces was none other than himself. And now, what moved him to action was most likely that pain.

The people who knew Daisuke—those who knew *Kakkou*, all called him a demon.

Looking at what he has done, that was the obvious outcome. From the view of those who had been turned into Fallen by Daisuke, surely his figure would have been one of a demon.

He would gladly be called the devil if what he had done would cause the fighting to stop. Because of the existence of the demon, the fighting between Mushitsuki should have stopped due to fear.

And then, after that demon defeats the *Original Three*, he would disappear when the fighting has stopped in its truest meaning.

He sometimes thought that everything he had done so far had backfired

instead. How often had he thought that he should not have been born?

“.....”

His fist that was touching the wall slowly tightened.

If he relaxed himself even a bit, he felt like he would just lose consciousness. This was likely due to the consecutive sleepless nights he had. Wrapped in the hot vapour of the shower, thoughts of, ‘wouldn’t it be fine if I just don’t wake up like this’, floated through his hazy mind.

Amidst his thin consciousness, Touko’s words from before came into his mind.

Those happy times which made you think you met them for the sake of that time—.

Were there that kind of moments? Daisuke tried to recall from his memories those days when he spent casually with the people he met, days without fighting nor farewells.

The memories of his family. Memories of his parents had already blurred away and the only thing he remembered was the smile of his elder sister.

—I am going to pamper you so much so until you cry at me to stop.

His sister and her friend along with Daisuke were walking along on the way back from school. His sister had said proclaimed that proudly towards her friend which made him so embarrassed that he went home ahead.

And then, it was only a few years later, after he became a Mushitsuki, that he met a girl who spoke with him as equal.

—You’re annoying! Who cares about your circumstances. I’ve already made up my mind to go to the pool tomorrow!

The girl whose selling points were a petite exterior and a huge ego said so, puffing her chest out. By her side were the usual two girls, one of which was always smiling and the other with a slightly troubled look. Daisuke couldn’t help but heave a sigh as always.

And as time went by even further, he met a girl that would be his nemesis whom he was destined to fight.

—*Uwaa*, what a boring response! So lame!

The girl who made such an exaggerated grimace in the classroom, yet still looked beautiful. Daisuke only ignored her sarcasm, and laughed it off composedly.

—Isn't Senri cute.

The boy who called Daisuke his comrade, said that with a faint smile while staring at Senri. Daisuke could only put up a strained smile and agree with him to avoid his outburst.

Finally—.

—.....Okay.

The girl holding onto Daisuke's hand nodded shyly. However, a smile of happiness could be seen forming from her lips.

"Hahaha....."

A surge of emotions welled up in Daisuke's heart, causing him to burst out in laughter.

Indeed, there were.

There were moments where he had met people just for the sake of that time. Despite fighting against his Mushi that consumed his dreams day and night, there were indeed memories still remaining inside of Daisuke.

"Aah, Harukiyo. It was just as you said."

Laughing out loud, he turned off the shower. His faint consciousness became sharp again.

Memories of those days where he met and laughed with them remained in Daisuke's heart. The warmth that he felt at those times roused his feet to step forwards, regardless of his own feelings.

"Looks like I still haven't lived long enough. No matter what happens from now on, I'll live on nonetheless."

I'll finish everything.

This has nothing to do with Mushitsuki nor the Special Environmental

Preservation Bureau nor fighting.

Not with *Kakkou* nor *Fuyuhotaru*.

Until the day that Kusuriya Daisuke and Anmoto Shiika can meet again, just like the other day, as any normal boy and girl.

—Okay, it's a promise.

Until the day he feels the warmth of that hand once again.

“.....*Huu*.”

Tying the towel around his waist, he left the shower room. Having forgotten to take a change of clothes, he headed to his bedroom to retrieve it.

“I see. Yes, yes, I totally get you. The Vice-director is just like this, always giving out order so self-importantly while never ever considering our circumstances. What a pain for us both to have such selfish superiors, right.”

He heard Touko's hearty voice.

“.....?”

Wondering if she was on the phone, Daisuke headed for the living room.

“Yea, that's right. She should have just come here herself if she wanted to hear about it, she didn't even consider the risk I would be in coming here. How troubling.”

Looking at the scene depicted in front of him, Daisuke was at a loss for words.

Well, Touko lying on the table with an open beer in her hand wasn't particularly a problem. However, the one who was patting her head with a figure unlike that of an adult was—.

“*A-awawa!* What kind of appearance is that, Daisuke-san! Y-you can't do this kind of thing! I oppose sexual harassment!”

“*Uwaa, Kakkou-san* you pervert! What are you intending to do to me?”

Touko covered her face with her hands and faced the other side, while the other youth (he still did not know what was he was a boy or a girl) copied her actions completely. He was someone Daisuke knew.

“Ume.....!”

Having a small and thin stature combined with a baby face, it was a youth whose sex was hard to determine. It was unknown if his cheeks were slightly red from having seen the half-naked Daisuke, or if it was because he had imbibed some alcohol along with Touko.

Kusezaki Ume. He was one of Harukiyo’s comrades.

“Why are you here.....!”

Daisuke immediately entered a fighting stance. Conversely, Ume remain seated with a grin.

“We intruded into the Central Headquarters database and searched for your address. Now that ‘C’-san hasn’t been reinstated, my comrades can at least retrieve information of this level.”

“How did you enter here?”

“When I called on the intercom, Goroumaru-san just let me in.”

“Eh, ah, you didn’t hear the intercom? I thought for sure that it was Daisuke-san’s friends.....”

“I don’t have any friends.”

“Please stop releasing that bloodlust, it’s very scary. I’m just here to talk, that’s all. Okay?”

Ume smiled affably. But, Daisuke did not let his guard down. His handgun had been left behind in the bathroom. If it came down into a fistfight, Touko would not be able to escape injuries.

“Stop messing around. Did you forget our fight at Housawa Town? I already know that you guys are cooperating with the Central Headquarters. That—”

“Now, now, Daisuke-san. There’s no harm to just having a conversation, right. After all, we want to get our hands on any kind of information available anyway.Err, Ume-san, was it? Is Oolong tea alright with you?”

Touko poured some tea into a plastic cup with a sociable smile. Ume seemed to be delighted like that of a child and replied with a, ‘Thank you’.

Daisuke glared at Touko.

“Touko-san..... I heard from Haji that he had already told you about the matter about Ume before.”

“Eh? I-is that so? It was so long ago that I seem to have forgotten. *Ahaha*, you know how my memory is like.”

Touko glossed over the matter with a jovial smile. Daisuke did not know what was she thinking inviting over their enemy just like this and displayed a strikingly antagonistic face. He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

“Finish it within five minutes. If you’re still here after that, I’ll slaughter you.”

“*Uwaa*, so cold, that makes me a bit sad..... Okay, I’ll get straight to the point. There’s something I want to ask you. It should be something that *Kakkou-san* knows.”

“What is it.”

“What is the dream of Horisaki Azusa-san?”

Ume coolly asked.

Daisuke and Touko’s faces stiffened.

“So, the one displayed in that disk is really her.....”

“Well, who knows? But, it seems like all the other branches other than the East Central Branch should have received orders to search for her.”

“What are you going to do after you know of it?”

“.....So, you do know, *Kakkou-san*. We just desire a bit of help from you only.”

The nature of Ume’s smile changed. His previously childish expression now appeared bewitching. The people around Harukiyo were all some kind of suspicious fellows.

Daisuke flashed a sarcastic smile back at him.

“Whether it is his connections with Central Headquarters or this thing right now, to make a deal with someone else isn’t typical of Harukiyo. Tell him to come by here himself if he has something to say.”

“To Harukiyo, this kind of thing is not even a deal. The same with the matter about Central Headquarters.”

“What are you guys scheming?”

“Who knows? It may be world domination for all I know. Ah, but if it was Harukiyo, surely he would say that that would’ve be boring.”

Daisuke glared at Ume who was playing innocent. Touko seemed to have lost the opportunity to speak and could only look back and forth between the two of them.

“Anyway, what we want to know right now is Horisaki Azusa’s dream. Why was it that only the two of them, *Centipede* and her, have resurrected from the Fallen status—no, what we want to know is if they have actually even been resurrected.”

“If they have actually even been resurrected.....? What do you mean, Ume-san?”

“Whether the one there is a fragment or the main body..... we need to confirm that no matter what. If it is the main body, surely *that* would also be nearby—”

“Say it in a way we understand.”

When Daisuke pursued him for an answer, Ume kept silent. The smile was gone from his face before they even realised it.

“So, you can’t answer any of our questions.Go back, there’s nothing for us to speak about.”

“We know the current whereabouts of *Fuyuhotaru*.”

“!”

Daisuke’s heart pounded so heavily it felt like it was drumming his chest. At Ume’s unexpected words, Touko sprang up from her seat as well.

“If *Kakkou-san* gave you that information, you will tell us Shiika-san’s position?”

“Seems like she’s on the move. If you don’t hurry, she might just go

somewhere else.”

“.....It’s still too early for me and Shiika to meet. Wasn’t that what Harukiyo said.”

“That’s because she’s in quite an interesting place right now. Perhaps, he wanted to see *Kakkou-san*’s surprised look?”

“.....”

Daisuke stared at Ume who started smiling again in suspicion. Even as he stared into his eyes, he couldn’t see his inner thoughts at all.

Just what are they scheming.....?

Seeing Daisuke being on his guard, Ume heaved a big sigh. Slumping his shoulders, he looked up at Daisuke.

“Hey, *Kakkou-san*. Actually, I have another motive when I come here.”

“.....”

“Did *Kakkou-san* never thought about this? No matter the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau or Mushibane..... or whether one is a Mushitsuki or an ordinary person, all these labels are meaningless. We are all separated into allies and enemies because of these labels. If we didn’t have those things..... don’t you think we could have been friends? Even *Lady-san* too could have been our friend.”

Daisuke’s face twisted.

“Surely, *Kakkou-san* had thought so all this time. That the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau was the true demon all along.”

“What are you trying to say.....!”

Ume raised a hand towards Daisuke who raised his voice. The cherubic smile on his face truly resembled that of a pure angel.

“Hey, *Kakkou-san*. Won’t you come with us?”

Daisuke widened his eyes.

—Why..... why did you have to be *Kakkou*.

He recalled the face of Tachibana Rina who had died as *Ladybird*. If they had not met as enemies, then he wouldn't have had to fight against the girl who had the same dream as him—.

Silence descended in the room.

“I—”

The voice that broke the silence came from beside Daisuke and Ume who were staring at each other.

“I won't allow that! Never ever! If Daisuke-san isn't here anymore, the rest of us would.....! I would absolutely not allow that! I will not permit it, Daisuke-san!”

Looking at Touko protesting with tears in her eyes, Ume gave a funny laugh.

“Don't pay any heed to what Touko-san is saying, *Kakkou-san*. After all, they just want to make use of you in the end.You would be able to meet *Fuyuhotaru-san* much earlier if you came along with us.”

“What, hey..... d-don't put things in such a misleading way! We are just allies with the same goal.....!”

“.....”

Daisuke wordlessly looked down.

It might be just as what Ume have said. If it wasn't for the position he had in the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, he might have been able to rush to Shiika's side right this moment.

However—.

“Five minutes is up. Hurry up and get out, Ume.”

“.....!”

“Speaking about Shiika, I would definitely meet her someday, no matter where we stand. Where we meet doesn't matter, and I have no intentions of helping you guys out either.”

Ume's face contorted slightly.

He had exchanged a promise with Shiika on Christmas. As long as he doesn't

forget that, they would definitely meet again.

That's why, Daisuke had things that he needed to do before then.

"I will continue to fight my battles right here. Continue fighting and fighting until I am stronger than anyone else. So much so that even if the Central Headquarters and Mushibane and you guys and everyone else came together, you would still not be able to oppose me. Whether it is you or whoever, I will use my strength to shut you up."

He glared at Ume and laughed intrepidly. Ume's face turned pale as if he was cowering under Daisuke's gaze.

"Try somewhere else if you're trying to increase your pawns, I already have a reservation here. After all, my like-minded partner is going to wake up very soon."

"Daisuke-san....."

Touko looked up at Daisuke.

The man who involved Daisuke in this fight amongst the Mushitsuki, Haji Keigo, is definitely going to wake up very soon. The two of them had started this fight together, and when the fighting ends, he would undoubtedly be by his side too.

"....."

Ume could only be seen biting his lips for a second. He immediately reverted to a bright smile and stood up.

"*Fuyuhotaru-san* is currently at Nishito City."

".....!"

"You're trying so hard to hold yourself back even though you're actually very interested. —Well, I'll get going now before I'm killed. Excuse me for the intrusion."

With that, Ume quickly got up to leave.

Daisuke clicked his tongue.

".....That one seeks somebody who would make use of her."

Not looking in Ume's direction, Daisuke spoke out as if to himself. Ume stopped his feet.

"Because her pride is higher than anyone else's..... no, that's all the more so why she could not stand that she herself did not possess any immense dream. That's why she thought of lending a hand to somebody with a grand objective..... that is her dream."

"In other words, she seeks a 'king'..... I see, *Centipede* is the same too."

Ume too did not face Daisuke as he said grinning.

"Thank you, *Kakkou-san*. With this, I am confident.*It* is unquestionably in the Central Headquarters. And in the near future, *that* too surely—"

"....."

"Bye bye, *Kakkou-san*. It would be great if we can meet again while we are still alive."

Leaving behind an angel-like smile, Ume left.

Watching the youth leave, Touko muttered.

"Just what is Harukiyo thinking..... also, what could *that* refer to.....?"

"Who knows?"

Replying to her curtly, Daisuke left the living room.

".....I'm glad that you decided to stay behind, Daisuke-san."

He heard a worriless voice from behind.

—*Fuyuhotaru-san* is currently at Nishito City.

Daisuke turned around.

"Touko-san—"

3.02 Chiharu Part 4

Chiharu's window-side seat was bathed in the warm sunlight.

The spring cleaning of the school compound had just ended, and everyone had returned to their classrooms for short homeroom.

Letting the words of the form teacher drift pass her ears, Chiharu gazed out of the window.

The black floor of the courtyard laid bare after all the fallen leaves were cleared during the cleaning. Sunlight reflected off the surface of the small pond and glittered, and the occasional glimpse of koi carps could be seen swimming underneath. A broom probably forgotten by someone was left leaning against the wall of the passageway.

Apart from the teacher's words forming the BGM, the school was wrapped in a serene silence. There were a few minutes before the chime ring, after which chaos would inevitably descend from the rush of students going home. Someone probably told a joke in the class next door as the sound of people bursting into laughter could be heard.

One may feel sleepy from the tedium in addition to this weather, but that was not so for Chiharu. Usually in these circumstances, she would hum at a volume only she could hear to herself and converse with the 'somebody' in her mind.

It is as peaceful as always around here. Really, it feels as if things like war and natural disasters only happen inside of television screens.

It's like they don't have a sense of reality at all?

Is somebody out there fighting even now?

Is someone dying somewhere out there?

Hey, how about at your side?

Are your surroundings as peaceful as it is here? Or are there people fighting there? Could it possibly be that..... you yourself is in the middle of a battle?

“Are you listening, Ayukawa?”

Being pointed out by the teacher, Chiharu returned to attention.

She came to sense of her own reality, to that of an undisturbed classroom.

Pretending to face the front and listen to the teacher’s words, she stealthily stole a glance at the courtyard.

Spring break is coming very soon over here.Plans? I don’t have anything like that in particular. At most, I would be hanging out around the streets with my friends. Or perhaps, should I actually go on a trip by myself somewhere? Where do you think would be a good place to go?

The chime signalling the end of school rang.

“Chiharu~. We’re going to the karaoke now, you coming too?”

Turning around to the voice calling her, Chiharu found her friends gathered around. The boy who confessed to her a few days ago was in the group as well.

“Ah, sorry. I have something to attend to today.”

“Really? Aren’t you done with the Student Council’s work? Is it something important?”

“Hmm, is it important? Yep, it’s important.”

When Chiharu nodded, the male student averted his gaze.

.....It’s not like that, it’s not like I’m bothered by that. There’s just something I want to do, really, that’s all.

She apologised to the boy in her mind and said sorry to her friend who invited her.

“Sorry about that. Well, that’s it. Bye bye, see you tomorrow. Take care of yourselves.”

She swiftly left the classroom and started to headed home.

She went down the stairs and retrieved her shoes from the shoe rack. Leaving the school compound, she headed in the direction of her home.

Having ended school before noon today, the sun was directly above her head.

Bathed in the early spring sunlight, she walked along with light footsteps while humming.

When she reached her house, she found that the door to the entrance was locked. Her mother must have gone out.

“.....?”

In the apartment facing her house, the windows of that particular unit were opened. She thought that that was unusual, or rather this was the first time she saw it open. Did somebody move in?

She shut her curtains and changed. She chose a blouse and jeans along with the casquette as headwear for today. Making sure to put her wallet into her back pocket, she left the house.

She felt like walking today. Leaving her bicycle as it is, she set out for the streets.

Humming as she walked, she soon reached the boulevard.

She entered the coffee shop right next to the station, bought a milk tea and a sandwich and sat on the counter by the window side. Setting her hat on the table, she then commenced on her meal.

“.....Now, then.”

After she was done filling her stomach, she put on her hat. She left the shop and came to the front of the station.

She observed the gantry for a while before walking away.

Her next destination was ‘URBAN’. It seemed that construction was still on hold for now, and there were no signs of people around anywhere.

Passing through the fence, she headed for the Urban Dome. She entered the entrance of the dome, ascended the stopped escalator and proceeded to the lounge on the second floor.

The paradise was in good health today too.

The midday sun rays filtered down the domed ceiling onto the foliage.

“Hi there, how are you doing?”

Chiharu spoke out in a soft voice with a smile.

The long-haired girl was lying on her side sleeping. White legs extended from the hem of her thin cloth-like garment. Her face was still as pale as a doll, but it looked much more vitalised compared to a few days ago.

“Where did you go yesterday? I was chasing after you, you know?”

Chiharu once again laid down on the floor and poked the girl’s cheeks with her index finger. The girl looked slightly bothered and creased her eyebrows.

“Well, whatever. The next time you wake up, I’ll talk to you properly. If it is the case that..... you know about my matters, there’s plenty of things I want to hear from you.”

She stood up with a smile.

“Today shall be just a greeting since I have something on. I’ll come by again, *my darling.*”

Sending her a flying kiss, Chiharu turned on her heels.

Suddenly, a *gatan* sound came from the entrance.

“.....?”

She thought that there was somebody, but did not see the figure of anyone when she descended the escalator. Chiharu tilted her head in wonder and left the dome.

Leaving the premises of ‘URBAN’, Chiharu returned to the station.

She walked down the roundabout by the station entrance and stopped before the gantry. She joined the youths sitting on the guardrail and hummed to herself.

Chiharu was waiting.

She continued to wait while gazing at the people walking by.

She did not feel bored, however.

That was because she had someone to talk to.

Someone whom she had known since long ago despite not knowing their

name nor face.

.....It is very warm here at my side. And it should be getting even warmer too. It was like this last year, and also the one before that.

Chiharu conversed in her mind.

And surely, it would not change next year. Nor the year after and many after. And I would probably be leading this kind of peaceful life from now onwards too, forever and ever.

—And without remembering anything too.

She seemed to hear somebody muttering from afar.

3.03 Chami Part 3

Hiding in the shadow of the monument by the entrance of Urban Dome, Chami shuddered.

“H-Horisaki Azusa.....”

Taking a look at the lounge on the second floor behind Chiharu, Chami muttered out hoarsely. She had sprinted down the escalator in panic upon seeing her and collided into the monument. It was lucky that she had not been discovered by Chiharu.

She had planned to abandon her mission of observing Ayukawa Chiharu after today.

Having shadowed Chiharu all the way since school, they arrived here. She obviously did not have the leeway to return to base and change, and was thus in her school uniform.

For five years, *Owl*, Chami's pawn, had undertaken this mission. The cat had dutifully carried out this mission for five years and had observed nothing out of the ordinary till now. Thinking that there would not be any changes from now on, Chami carried out the observation mission with her own eyes for the first time and thought to abandon the mission after that.

She had also thought that the fact that *Owl* died was purely due to bad luck.

Chami had thought that that was the result of *Owl* coincidentally coming to clash with the visitor from Central Headquarters, *Kanata*, whose nature she did not know, while he was engaged in his own mission. —Even if one brushes it off as having bad luck, she certainly did not plan on letting him off just like that. While *Kanata* was fulfilling his mission, she was planning on turning him into one of her pawns, or to enact some punishment on him.

Chami was also thinking of finally taking action once she was done with all the matters in Nishito City.

Her target was *Fuyuhotaru*, as well as the resurrectee who had escaped from

Central Headquarters. If she was able to get her hands on either one of them, then she would be able to get into the 'heart' of the Central Headquarters.

However, before she could do any of those, Chami witnessed something momentous.

“!”

When she looked up, she saw a lone girl standing still.

“.....*Hii*.....!”

She instinctively released a scream.

The girl was looking down on Chami with a shadowy gaze. Her cloth-like garment was fluttering, and her inhuman dark pupils was looking in her direction from within her long hair.

Chami seemed to hear the sound of a bell resounding heavily. —The sound appeared familiar to Chami, who harboured a Mushi of the Special type.

“!”

When she lifted her head to take another look, there was nothing left at the position.

A-an illusion.....? No, that's not it. That was the one who did *Kanata* in.....! But, why was Ayukawa Chiharu.....? Could it be that it sensed my hostility?

Dashing out of the entrance, she tripped and fell over.

She hit her shoulders strongly against the wall of Urban Tower, her face distorting and she groaned. Kneeling on one knee, she angrily slammed her fist against the wall.

“Damn it.....! So that's it.....! Shit, damn it!”

Anger rised up from within her.

All the dots had connected in her mind.

“*Owl*! Did you know that things would come to this? That's right, there's no way I could possibly let this chance slip by! God damn it! For my sake, you..... you tried to defeat *Kanata*? That's why you left that kind of set up behind? For my sake!”

Good grief, I can't think of this as anything other than an impossible coincidence.

The one whom Ayukawa Chiharu came into contact with in the dome was none other than Horisaki Azusa. She was unmistakably the one on the search order disseminated by the Central Headquarters.

That bearded man, *Kanata*, probably chased Horisaki Azusa all the way here to 'URBAN'. He was going to dispatch Horisaki Azusa over there—and most likely Chiharu as well who was there for whatever reasons. And *Owl* decided to stand in *Kanata's* way so as to prevent that from happening.

In that case, just who was Horisaki Azusa?

Chami was convinced about her true identity. Those eyes that were looking at her just then. In addition to *Konoha's* report that it was 'not human', and the fact that she possessed the strength to drive *Kanata* to retreat—.

She was the other resurrectee apart from *Centipede* that was recorded in the disk about the experiments conducted by Central Headquarters—the target whom Chami was planning to search for once she was done with her business here in Nishito City.

"I know it already, I'm just going to do it! Since I'll have to face it someday anyway! If I die here, that would just mean the end of this shitty life!"

Kanata would definitely come for Horisaki Azusa's life once his body have recovered. Even if she wasn't killed, she would be reduced to a Fallen. That was what happened to the other resurrectee, *Centipede*, who was done in by another Rank 3 Blaze class member, *Kasuou*.

However, she can't let that happen.

If Chami could get her hands on Azusa first, she would be able to obtain valuable information. That includes what the Central Headquarters was doing, and also what were they trying to achieve from those experiments. That information would indubitably prove to be of great use to Chami in her investigation of the mysteries of the Mushitsuki. With this chance dangling right in her face, there was no way that she could possibly let it slip by without doing anything.

“That’s right..... this is a chance. Not to mention, this is a huge chance. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this is the chance I was waiting for throughout these five years. Nobody would even look in my direction all these time, but now.....”

It was impossible for Chami to get close to Horisaki Azusa by herself. Even the Rank 3 pure combatant, *Kanata*, had been sent withdrawing by her hands. And even if she wanted to obtain Azusa, *Kanata* remains a hindrance to her. She must get rid of him, yet find another way to approach her.

“.....”

Chami quickly calmed her mind and got up, leaving ‘URBAN’.

While walking to the station, Chami ran through simulations of all the strategies she would take for every possible situation in her mind.

.....No matter how strong the opponent is, I can win as long as I can plant my Mushi into them. That is the only thing that is indisputable. That was all I developed during these five years without anyone’s knowledge. With just this ability, I’ll show them all how I can get to the ‘heart’ of the Mushitsuki before anyone else.

In contrast to the look of composure on her face, the simmering emotions in her heart was coming into a boil.

“Owl. Did you thought so too and designed this set up in advance? What an audacious fellow, don’t just overestimate me anyhow like that.”

She headed for the station.

She spotted the figure of Ayukawa Chiharu sitting on the guardrail near the gantry.

“Or could it be that..... you’ve developed feelings for this peace-complacent idiotic girl who never knew hardship? Maybe, both are true? Well, that doesn’t matter. After all, your life is already tied to my this shitty life. Don’t think that you have escaped my clutches just because you’ve died. The lives of my pawns belong to me. I’ll bring you along with the ride even if you don’t want to.”

Chami headed directly to Chiharu’s side.

Chiharu was watching the human traffic and humming from her mouth. What an oblivious peace-loving girl.

But, the thing that irritated Chami the most was Chiharu's side-profile. Unlike the rest of the people sitting on the guardrail, her surrounding alone seems to be illuminated, or that time seemed to flow slowly around her..... almost as if to say she was the protagonist of a show.

Chami felt as though she could only settle as a side role, her insignificant existence incapable of being in the leading role. In contrast, there seemed to be an aura around Chiharu that designated her as the main character of the story.

Chami struck a daunting pose in front of Chiharu with an intimidating look.

Chami no longer needed to hide herself. Chiharu had no part to play at all in this path which she was going to proceed on from now onwards. What would start now was not the story about youth starring Chiharu either. It was nought but a foul, blood-soaked third-rate movie.

“.....Hmm?”

Chiharu looked up at Chami puzzledly.

Chami did not speak.

Amidst the crowd, the two of them stared into each other momentarily.

The one who moved first was Chiharu. With a grin, she raised both of her hands towards Chami and formed a rectangle with her fingers. —That too was a picturesque action. Looking at it, Chami felt intensely mortified.



“*Pipii*, verification complete. Attendance number 28 of Class A of the First Year, Konomura Chami! Ah, corrections. It is Konomura Chami in a seemingly bad mood!”

Chiharu articulated smoothly with a clear voice.

Chami creased her eyebrows. She had never once come into contact with Chiharu beyond what was necessary.

“Why do you know my name, Ayukawa-senpai?”

“Don’t you know my name too.”

“Anybody would have known the name of someone like the Vice-chairman of the Student Council. So, how about let me know the reason why you know my name?”

“In the Student Council, you are frequently mentioned..... as a problem child? For example, students who bully others or take drugs or played truant, their profiles are passed around to the Student Council.”

“Which one of them am I. I don’t remember bullying anyone in particular.”

“It’s the reverse, the opposite. We are keeping a watch out for you as you seem to have caught the eye of some scary seniors.”

A faint smile formed on Chami’s face. She did recall something like that. They were probably the friends of the second-year student who had called out the noncompliant Chami to the back of the school building (of course, before he even spoke a word, his emotions had already been amplified to the point where he lost consciousness by her Mushi).

“By the way, one of them was brought to the hospital for a panic attack, do you have any ideas what could have caused it? Hmm?”

“Well, I have no clues at all. He probably realised the futility of having such a shitty life like his own and despaired.”

“.....Do you always speak with a tone like that? That’s such a waste of your cute looks.”

“I don’t really mind that. Not like I have any interest in males anyway.”

“H-huh? Are you trying to pick me up by any chance?”

“I don’t lean that side either. Even if that was the case, I wouldn’t be interested in someone like you.”

“What a pity.”

Chiharu looked relieved. But then, she brought her face close to Chami with a smile. Her nicely-shaped lips came close to Chami intimately.

“I have a liking for girls like Chami-chan.”

“Huh? *Huuh?*”

Watching Chami distance herself in surprise, Chiharu burst into laughter.

“*Ahahaa*. Just kidding.”

Unlike Chiharu who was holding onto her stomach and laughing, Chami knew that her face was blushing with anger and discomfiture. Her heart pounded heavily with a *dokidoki* annoyingly.

What the heck is she.....! Is she an idiot? No, she is an idiot! There’s no doubts about it!

If this had been a movie or a play, the casting would have been heavily unbalanced. In contrast to Chiharu’s flamboyant and exaggerated actions, Chami only stood there with a sullen look.

“Don’t just stand there while we talk, why don’t you take a seat. Do you need me for any matters?”

Chiharu patted at the space next to her with a smile.

Chami expressed some hesitation but ultimately sat down as she was told. Since this was the last time they would meet, she thought that there would be no harm in talking to her anyway.

“Nothing much. I was just amazed to see you sitting here with a blithe look on your face.”

She thought of using polite speech with Chiharu just as a normal junior would so as to avoid making a strong impression in her, but felt that that consideration was stupid and just spoke with her usual tone.

That did not seem to have harmed Chiharu's mood at all. On the contrary, it seemed to stir interest in her and she scrutinised Chami's face. Chami looked away from her and faced the human traffic.

"Do I look that carefree? Well, not like I have anything to hide, I am often told that by others."

"Not like you're trying to hide that either. It's written all over your face. You look all peaceful and happy—did you ever thought that there might have been a battle right next to you, and you did not even feel any of it. For all you know, someone could have died in that battle and you would just keep on living without a care."

"Yes, it's just as you said. I had thought of this previously too, but it feels like I'm living too happily. I was always wondering if perhaps somebody had been protecting me all this time."

".....Even if that was the case, that has nothing to do with you. They were probably just satisfied protecting you. They are surely laughing with a bright smile."

"Is that so? Hearing you say it like that..... for some reason, I feel a bit saved."

The smiling face of Chiharu looked a bit clouded.

.....Saved? Why would she think that?

Seeing Chami who knotted her eyebrows in bewilderment, Chiharu smiled cheerfully.

"Thank you. Chami-chan is so kind."

"Huh? *Huuh?*"

Her heart pounded deeply again. No one had ever said that she was kind before, and she herself did not think that she was kind either. —An itchy sensation welled up in her heart, similar to in the past when *Owl* snuggled her head against her.

"So, so kind! So terribly kind! Far too kind! So much so that I want to hug you right now!"

"S-stop that! Hey..... let go of me!"

Chiharu probably found Chami's flustered reaction amusing, as she hugged her arm tightly. Chami desperately tried to shake her off. Countless passers-by turned to look at the two struggling girls.

Finally having escaped from Chiharu's evil clutches, Chami caught her breath and calmed down. It seems that her pace would be messed up when she was with this girl. It would be best for Chami to end her business with Chiharu as quickly as possible and leave this place.

"Haah, Haah..... More importantly, what are you doing at this place?"

"Me? I'm just waiting for someone here. Yesterday, there was a girl who lent me some money here, you see."

Chiharu replied casually.

Chami recalled what Aya said yesterday. As she was observing Chiharu yesterday, she mentioned about how there was a girl who lent Chiharu some money to purchase a ticket in front of the station.

"Hmm. So, when is she coming?"

"I don't know."

".....Huh, what kind of response is that. You didn't make a promise to meet here?"

"Nope. But, I did say that I would return her the money."

Chami's jaw dropped.

"W-wait a minute. So, you're here for that? You're waiting for her here not knowing if she would even come? Even though she might've been some traveller who just passed by here randomly? What if she never comes by this street ever again?"

"Well, yeah, something like that."

Chiharu scratch her head with a bitter smile.

Chami was beyond amazed and felt weary. She felt like an idiot for trying to have a decent talk (at least that was her intention) with her.

"Haah..... that's idiotic. No, you are an idiot. At this point of time, it doesn't

even matter anymore whether you are the senseless one or if it is me. Surely something went weird somewhere. Yep, that's the problem, let's just keep it that way."

"It feels like I would be able to meet her again if I continued to wait here for some reason. I don't have a basis for that, but it's something like an intuition? It's like things have become clear to me recently."

"Did anything else happen recently?"

Chami sharpened her focus and pored over Chiharu's expression. That way, she would be able to discover if she was lying.

The person in question, Chiharu, seemed to be in high spirits.

"Yes, I found a slightly weird child.That child always seems to be sleeping, so she should not have been conscious about me. But, for some reason, I seem to think that that child seems to know something about me. Though, I don't have any basis for that either."

As she spoke, a smile formed on her face.

"....."

That was..... not a lie. Chami had determined so. Judging from her past behaviour thus far, she has established that the girl known as Chiharu based her actions on 'instinct'.

Ayukawa Chiharu had completely no link to this matter just as she had expected.

It was just a coincidence, indeed, just by god's whim, that this girl drew close to the battlefield. However, this kind of world did not suit her. As long as she does not notice what was going on, she would be able to continue on the kind of peaceful live which she had led these past five years.

"It would've been better if you do not meet her anymore."

"Eh?"

Chami looked away from Chiharu towards the crowd.

Looks like she may have been influenced by the aura of peace given off by

Chiharu. Being by her side made Chami feel like she was just an ordinary female highschooler. Like as if she had been leading a normal, everyday lifestyle so far, not that of being a member of some secretive organisation.

“I don’t know what you had in mind when trying to approach someone like that, but you had better stop. Since you do not know what kind of person they are, there’s a possibility that they would cause harm to you.”

“.....”

“There can’t possibly be somebody who’s protecting you in secret, that’s the fact about it. Even if there was hypothetically, if you had noticed them, or if you were to get yourself injured needlessly, wouldn’t that be stepping all over their will. Maybe even their reason for existence.”

Chami said while staring at the congestion of people indifferently.

There’s no need for an ordinary girl like Ayukawa Chiharu to notice it.

The fighting should just be left to those who can’t do anything else. —To people like Chami.

“There’s no need for you to notice anything. You should just live your peaceful life like always. It is your duty to do so.”

It would be troubling to Chami if she did not lead an eventless life. Because today would be last time that Chami undertook her mission of observing Chiharu before she abandoned it. If Chiharu stuck her head needlessly into some trouble, the SEPB would notice that Chami was not doing her mission.

“Duty, huh.”

Chiharu who had only listened silently till then, muttered.

“Hearing you speak like that, I wonder if it is alright for me to seek happiness as well.”

“Of course, you should try your best to seize happiness. Without thinking of things like suffering or fighting, just keep leading your life.”

Lead a fulfilling life, without pain nor blood. —If one doesn’t aim for that, wouldn’t there be no point living. If everyone deceived, fought and rushed towards their death as Chami did, then life would be far too worthless.

If people like Chiharu exist, there would be something for people to aspire for. That someday, even people like themselves—can live in that manner. Perhaps, even a cat would think this way.

“.....But.”

Chami sighed and glared at Chiharu.

“Just when is that person you are waiting for going to come? Quite some time has passed already.”

“There’s no way we would meet so easily. Chami-chan sure has a short patience.”

Chiharu had a relaxed look. She seemed unknown to that of boredom, as she started to hum out of nowhere in good mood.

“There’s no one in the world who has more patience than me. What’s that girl’s name? No matter how much of a weirdo with strange thought processes you are, surely even you would have asked for that, right?”

“That’s some harsh words you are spouting..... Of course, I have asked for it. She’s called Anmoto Shiika-chan.”

Chami’s thought processes halted completely.

Her heart may have even stopped beating for a second. Just that one sentence by Chiharu dealt such a heavy blow to Chami.

“What..... did you just say?”

“Eh? That’s some harsh words—”

“After that.”

“Anmoto Shiika-chan.That’s all I said.”

A twitching smile came onto Chami’s face. She was so surprised that she could not do anything but laugh.

—Anmoto Shiika.

The higher-ups of SEPB would also probably have had their minds blank out had they heard that name. Although not released officially, she had heard of it from *Konoha* already. Anmoto Shiika was her real name, but the Special

Environmental Preservation Bureau referred to her via a different codename.

Rank 1 Secret class Mushitsuki, *Fuyuhotaru*.

The one and only resurrectee (discounting those from ‘the experiment’ as failures) who reverted from the Fallen status.

The one who had come into contact with two other Rank 1 Mushitsuki, *Kakkou* and *Ladybird*, and had almost brought the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau to a collapse four years ago, the strongest Mushitsuki. In addition, she was also the trigger for a large-scale battle that almost led to the destruction of one of the cities, Hashiba City, a few months ago.

She was truly the one at the ‘heart’ of Mushitsuki. Whether be it in the past or the future, she was the key to which battles involving Mushitsuki revolved around.

“.....? What’s the matter, Chami-chan? You know that child?”

“H-how could I possibly know her.”

She struggled to put on a look of obliviousness, while her mind was still on the brink of panic.

T-to think that this..... She must have been referring to a complete stranger with the same name and surname. How could the ‘heart’ which I am searching for possibly appear in such a rural area. That’s right, this is too abnormal whatever the circumstances.....! To have Horisaki Azusa, and now even *Fuyuhotaru* appear in the same place at the same time is a miracle no matter how I look at it—.

—And also, it seems to be chasing after something.....

Kanata’s monologue came into her mind.

Perhaps, it’s not a miracle.....?

“.....”

Chami bit her nails with a stern face.

Maybe there’s some kind of reason linking Horisaki Azusa and *Fuyuhotaru*? Could one of them be chasing the other perchance? Looking at this situation, it

is likely that *Kanata* is chasing after Horisaki Azusa. If they had come together in a set..... then, they came to this city by chance.....?

“Chami-chan? Are you feeling unwell..... Ah!”

Chiharu was trying to take a look at Chami’s face when she suddenly raised her voice at what she saw opposite the roundabout.

Chami raised her head and look over there. A lone youth was walking towards them.

That guy..... looks pretty strong.

Chami watched him with appraising eyes.

He was a youth around the same age as Chami with a headband tied around his head. His gait and gaze showed no signs of any openings, suggesting a disposition to fighting. He did not look like he underwent training, instead he seemed to possess an innate strength. He was like a raw ore, one that if polished by a boxing coach, would probably go on to be a world champion.

.....However, he is still half-hearted.

But, that was considering how he was currently. One could probably defeat him if he was a little careless, but he looked like he would get strong once he has accumulated some experience. As Chami took a sidelong glance at him with those thoughts, Chiharu jump down from the guardrail.

“Hey! You there! I’m here!”

Ignoring the gaze from the surroundings, Chiharu waved her hands fervently.

The youth sent a fleeting glimpse at Chiharu’s direction and approached them. However, he would occasionally turn around to look at other directions.

It looks like he is on the guard against something..... No, looking for something?

Chami narrowed her eyebrows.

“Hey, you. You are the one that Shiika-chan was with, right? Right?”

“Yea.”

In contrast to Chiharu who spoke high-spiritedly, the youth only replied

mechanistically. The youth turned his gaze to Chami.

“Hello there. Are you the friend of the girl, Anmoto Shiika?”

Chami enquired unreservedly. As she did so, the youth’s expression changed.

Not good, that was not good at all. That kind of behaviour makes it seem as if Anmoto Shiika is an important character.

Chami panicked in her mind while keeping a grin.

“No, I’m just an attendant. She was talking about you.”

Saying so, he looked at Chiharu.

“She said she saw you here from the hotel and requested for me to come. Your words to ‘return’ bothered her deeply, but she had been rebuked severely for going out yesterday. She probably won’t be going out for a while.”

“Eh? She was rebuked by her parents?”

“Well, something like that.”

“I see, though I would’ve wanted to meet her again.”

“By hotel, you mean the Imperial Hotel over there? You must have been at the highest floor to have been able to look over here that well.”

When Chami cut in, the youth kept quiet. But, he immediately nodded with a, ‘.....Yea’. It was hard to tell whether he was being on guard or not with that half-baked attitude of his.

Chiharu took out her wallet and retrieved a note from within.

“Then, can I entrust you to pass this to her for me? She really helped me out yesterday. Can you pass my thanks to her for me?”

“Yea. I can do something of that degree.”

“Yes, I feel much more at ease now! I’m glad I waited.See? Although it wasn’t the person herself, we got to meet again properly.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Facing Chiharu who spoke with a refreshed smile, Chami too replied with a smile.

.....Even at the very end, you've proved useful to me. Very much so too.

"Here we go. That ended earlier than I thought. I wonder if I should join up with them at the karaoke now, I feel kind of bad turning them down just now. —What're you going to do, Chami-chan?"

"I'm going to run some errands."

"I see. Well then, I shall see the two of you again."

Chiharu said to Chami and the youth with a smile, waving her hand.

Hmph..... see you again, not, Ayukawa Chiharu. It's bye bye to you here.

The grinning Chami and the expressionless boy were left behind, neither of them replying to her.

The figure of Chiharu as she disappeared within the crowd gave off a sense of peace as she had expected. Right now, it could be said that Chami had completely left the world which Chiharu resided in, heading towards a completely different stage from her.

"....."

The youth turned his back towards Chami and was about to leave without a word.

"Hey, you."

Chami called him to a stop sprightly.

"What?"

"Hmm..... Just as I expected. Ah, but maybe I'm wrong? No, he does look like it. What was that called again."

".....?"

"Oh, it's nothing much, it's just that you seem to resemble something. Err, what was it called again?"

"Oh really. Good for you if you remember it."

With an unconcerned attitude, the youth started to walk away. However, Chami stuck by his side.

“Well, well, just wait for a moment. If this nagging feeling sticks with me, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night. Just let me ask a few questions.”

“.....”

“I say, did you ever had anything that you wanted to do up till now? Because you just seem to be so uninterested in everything. Have you ever had somebody you like? What about someone you hate? Have you ever been so angry that you wanted to shout out loud? Did something happened before that made you want to cry? Have you ever been hurt? Or have you hurt others? Have you experienced something heartrending before? What about something that made you feel pathetic? Do you have things you regret? What do you wish for in the future?”

“.....What are you trying to say?”

“Ah, I finally remember what you resemble.”

At Chami’s barrage of questions, the initially expressionless youth showed some signs of wavering in his eyes. She did not let that opportunity escape.

“You look just like a Fallen.”

“!”

The youth widened his eyes. Chami grinned.

.....That sure shook you up, huh?

A red smoke hung over the youth’s back like that of a death god. The red smoke which only Chami could see morphed into the shape of a queen bee, and thrust its sharp needle into the youth’s medulla oblongata. The queen bee once again reverted into a red smoke and was sucked into the youth and disappeared.

This guy..... He was just as I had expected! He is strong but lacking in combat experience! His self-control does not reach the level of that of *Kakkou* or *Kanata*. Nonetheless, this level of turmoil is inadequate. In just a few days, my Mushi would dissipate by itself. But, this few days is more than enough!

“Oh..... even if I said Fallen, you probably wouldn’t know what it is. That was just something that I happen to know. Sorry for taking up your time. Now then,

farewell.”

Gloating on the inside, Chami quickly turned away from the youth.

“.....”

The youth stood there in confusion for a second before heading back to the hotel with a light head.

Chami left the streets with fast steps.

As she walked, all kinds of plan came into her mind.

She certainly never thought that the ‘key’ which she had desperately been looking for would so conveniently fall onto her laps in such a remote city. It was like somebody had decided to reward her for concealing her true intentions and treading lightly this whole five years. Unfounded thoughts like these ran through her mind.

Her unfaltering footsteps brought her to the front of Ayukawa Chiharu’s home. She climbed up the stairs to the apartment which the SEPB provided her with as a hideout and opened the door without even knocking.

“Chami.”

Sugitsu Aya, who was sitting in a corner of the room, turned to look in her direction. She was probably taking care of the visitor according to Chami’s instruction.

Ignoring Aya, Chami went further inside the unit.

“Heh, you look much neater now. So, you’re actually pretty young, at most a few years older than me?”

The half-naked man—no, more like youth, had bandage wrapped around his waist and was sitting on the bed eating cereal. He had probably cut his hair himself seeing as it was much shorter than the dishevelled mop he had yesterday. It seems like he had also used the razor as his stubble was gone as well.

Kanata raised his head to catch a glance of Chami.

“That has nothing to do with you.”

“Yes, yes, it’s just as you said. But, you’ve sure caused quite a bit of trouble for me. —To think that you were actually chasing after something like that. Don’t tell me you are trying to turn this city into ruins.”

The youth’s expression changed. He gazed at Chami with hostility and killing intent.

This was a gamble.

If her choice was wrong, Chami may be killed by the youth for possessing knowledge about his top-secret mission for all she knows. *Which* was he chasing—speaking of chance, she had some confidence in her guess, and anyway, there were only two possible conclusions with equal probabilities. It was either whether she lives or dies.

“You bastard..... what do you know? If you plan on getting in my way—”

“Get in your way? That’s absurd, I wouldn’t dare dream of doing something like that. If I had known, I wouldn’t possibly have suggested to help you out even if I was sleep talking. Who would have known that the one you were chasing to be—*Fuyuhotaru* of all people.”

“.....!”

Kanata was rendered speechless.

.....It’s my win, hell yeah!

Chami concentrated her attention, manifesting an imperceptible red smoke. A queen bee with wings that looked like workmanship of glass and compound eyes like jewels appeared behind the shaken *Kanata*. Its diamond-sharp needle pierced into the youth’s neck, and the red smoke entered his body.

Once Chami confirmed the sensation of her Mushi, a fearless smile formed on her face.

Kukuu.....! It’s perfect! My Mushi is planted firmly in your heart! From now onwards, you have no choice but to slowly turn crazy!

Without holding back at all, she exerted her full power. She had already abandoned any thoughts of using him as a pawn. She could not imagine what kind of effect would her ability which amplified the emotions would have on

him.

“Hmm? Was I wrong? It wasn’t *Fuyuhotaru*? Having received information that she was hiding in Imperial Hotel, I thought for sure that was the case.”

Of course, she had purposely mentioned the wrong target so as to cause him to waver. *Kanata* was no longer taking in the words of Chami who was acting innocent.

“*F-Fuyuhotaru* is in these streets.....? I see, the ‘king’ that she mentioned was..... so, she was pursuing after *Fuyuhotaru*.....”

He muttered to himself incoherently in a mumbled voice. To the current him, Chami, Aya, and the bowl containing the cereal rolling on the floor were probably no longer reflected in his eyes.

Now, don’t you need to get going already? You should already know where to go, right? Indeed, your goal lies right there. But, it might run away again if you strike from the front..... In that case, what should you do? Hmm? You know what you should do, right? That’s right, you need a ‘bait’! Isn’t that such a simple answer that even kids would be able to think of?

With this, the youth in front of Chami has been written into her scenario as well, entangling him into this mess which engulfed numerous people. In it, they would all fight amongst themselves—and the one who would have the last laugh would be Chami of course.

I’m going to seize everything by my own hand! I am going to get to the ‘heart’ of the Mushitsuki before anyone else, this me who nobody even knows about and nobody even turns a second look to!

In the cramped room, only the mumbling voice of *Kanata* repeated over and over again.

4.00 Chiharu Part 5

The chime signalling the end of school resounded.

While the rest of her classmates were standing up from their seats, only Chiharu alone was still seated gazing out of the window.

“You’re kidding, really?”

“Well, I’m not someone who tell lies. My two years younger cousin who lives in Akamaki City saw it pretty closely.”

Hearing her classmates’ conversation, Chiharu turned around.

“Hey, Chiharu. Did you hear that?”

“Eh? What was that?”

“Turns out, there really are Mushitsuki!”

One of her classmate leaned her body across Chiharu’s desk.

—.....

Something seems to stir in her heart.

“Mushi..... tsuki?”

“That’s right, Mushitsuki! My cousin saw it with her own eyes! An actual one, you know!”

Chiharu had some vague recollection about that term.

Now that she thought about it, she recalled hearing rumours about the monsters known as *Mushi* in the inner-city areas. They were monsters that possessed humans, feeding on their dreams in order to grow.

It felt like she had heard about this topic numerous times in the past. However, those were always baseless hearsays and Chiharu only treated those gossips as happenings of another world, on the same level as that of war and natural disasters occurring in other countries. To Chiharu who lived a peaceful everyday life, those speculations were completely detached from her.

But, for some reason, these words about Mushitsuki had a sense of reality to the current Chiharu.

“Mushitsuki.....”

“Can you believe it!Is something wrong, Chiharu? You look kinda gloomy today? Even though you are usually happy-go-lucky.”

“Eh? I seem like that?”

“Yeah. In fact, you have been this way since yesterday when we asked you out for karaoke.”

“I see. I must be nearing the age to have lots of worries then, that must be it.”

Speaking as if it was other’s problem, Chiharu stood up from her desk.

“Well then, I shall return home now. Farewell, everyone. Till the day we meet again—”

Carrying her bag, she walked briskly to the exit. The sound of laughter along with a voice saying, ‘What ‘till we meet again’, we’ll see each other again for the closing ceremony tomorrow isn’t it’, could be heard from behind.

Chiharu walked out of the classroom while humming.

—.....

But, she suddenly felt as if somebody had called out to her and she turned around.

What she saw was only the classroom that was cleaned beautifully and her classmates conversing merrily.

Nishito Sousei High School’s spring break started a bit earlier than other schools. After tomorrow’s closing ceremony, she would probably not come here again till when the next semester starts in April.

Looking at the classroom which had served her for this past one year, a smile came onto her face.

Somehow, she felt a desire to see the members of the Student Council again one more time. But, they had probably left their classrooms and embarked home by now.

“I am living blissfully today as well too.”

She muttered softly to nobody in particular.

With a smile on her face, she turned around and left the classroom.

She exited the school and headed home.

The scenery on her way back home was the same as always. There were other students on their way home walking with quick footsteps, overtaking her and walking towards the residential area under the early spring weather.

Once she reached home, she changed her clothes swiftly and readily.

“Hm?”

The windows of the unit opposite her were closed today, and there did not seem to be any sign of people. As it was like the past few years, the apartment regained the tranquillity that existed around it in the midst of the surrounding hustle and bustle.

After changing, Chiharu grabbed her usual casquette and left the house.

After she departed from the residential area, she emerged onto the boulevard leading to the station. She walked down the sidewalk lined with trees and hummed along while glancing at the shops on the side.

“Chami-chan..... I wonder if she would properly attend the closing ceremony tomorrow?”

The thought suddenly came into her mind and she voiced out her monologue.

Chami referred to the junior from her school that she had met coincidentally yesterday, Konomura Chami.

Her tone of voice was rude and tactless, but she was exceptionally smart. She probably had a tall pride, seeing as how she readily discarded using polite speech when speaking with Chiharu who was her senior. Her aloof yet strict side profile when she only looked forwards with an unshakeable will left a deep impression in her.

When she visited Chami’s classroom in hopes of calling out to her, she had been informed by her classmates that she was absent. From the attitude of the

student, she could tell that Chami was disliked by her class.

Chiharu wanted to call out to Chami because of an obscure feeling that she thought that they would get along well. She was drawn by Chami's attitude of not trying to ingratiate herself with anyone.

—There's no need for you to notice anything. You should just live your peaceful life like always. It is your duty to do so.

Chami had said that in brusque manner, but it did not sound like a pretence. Her unwavering figure was just like that of a warrior heading towards battle.

"Duty, huh."

She walked right passed the station.

—Duty.

What does duty even mean?

Did it refer to the reason for which you are born for, or something like that?

My junior from the same school, Konomura Chami, had said so yesterday. That my duty was to live my life out peacefully as always in the same manner as today. No matter if somebody was fighting a battle right next to me, or even if they had died as a result of that, I must not notice that and just live a life of happiness.

Is that really alright?

There are still some things which I don't remember from the past. I'm positive that the reason for this guilt I feel during my blissful everyday life lies in my past.

However, am I fine this way?

Am I fine the way I currently am, leading a life of happiness without knowing anything, without remembering anything?

Hey..... please tell me.....

"....."

Without her realising, she had stopped humming.

Looking forward with a stern countenance, a silver tower and dome were lined up in her view.

‘URBAN’.

The tower reflecting the intense sun rays seemed to pierce into the sky like a sword. The saucer-like dome that lied next to it resembled that of a huge platinum shield. The proud outlines of the buildings could truly be said to be the ultimate weapons of the battle god Urban.

“Even though she told me not to get close anymore, I can’t help but be interested.”

With a smile, she crossed the fence.

The surroundings of ‘URBAN’ was steeped in silence as always. Heavy machineries and building materials were left as they were, and the eaves lining the building gave off an ominous feeling. There was no sound apart from that of the cars passing by and the clamour from opposite the street, almost as if it was a ghost town.

A cuboid-shaped passageway connected Urban Tower and Urban Dome on the first and third floors. A plaza laid in front of the two buildings that contained a roundabout, with a slope leading down the ground to both buildings. Those probably led to the underground parking lots.

Chiharu headed for the dome and entered the building.

The walls and ceiling were supported with steel frames while the glass and reinforced plastic let light in. An inactive escalator in the centre led to the second floor which was an atrium with a forest.

She ascended the escalator and stepped towards the forest on the lounge on the second floor. What was probably a botanical garden for viewing pleasure had burgeoned into a forest after being left to its own devices for a long time.

A sleeping beauty laid in the centre of the botanical garden which had morphed into a green paradise.

The long-haired girl was sleeping on her side. Her limbs that extended from her clothes were pale and thin. Soft breathing could be seen from her lips on

her cherubic sleeping face.

“I’ve come to meet you again. Even after Chami-chan told me to stop doing so.”

With a smile on her face, Chiharu lied down facing her in the same position.

“Even though she said that that was my duty, I can’t seem to accept that. Really, why is that so?”

As a result of the dome being sealed off, the air was very fresh. The air was profuse with oxygen produced from the plants photosynthesising.

“In addition to that, it somehow feels like you know about me. Do you think I’m weird for feeling something like that? Even though I’ve only just found you and followed you by chance.”

Looking up at the ceiling blankly, Chiharu continued her oration.

“I am experiencing happiness every day. But..... for some reason, it feels like I have done something very awful. Hey, why is that so.....?”

The second half of her words became soft with the sudden onset of drowsiness.

Hey, please tell me..... just what had I done in the past?

She directed those words to nobody in particular.

“.....”

Obviously, there was no response. Under the gentle sunlight filtering from the ceiling and wrapped in an inexplicable sense of security, Chiharu started to doze off.

“!”

A black figure appeared beyond her thinly opened eyes. Due to the backlighting, she could only see the outlines, but somebody was looking over Chiharu’s face.

“Ah..... Eh? You.....!”

She hurriedly raised her body.

The girl had awakened. She was standing still with a sleepy look and looking down dazedly at Chiharu.

“E-erm, wai-.....”

Due to the all too sudden ‘meeting’, Chiharu completely lost her cool. This was the first time that she had met face-to-face with the girl while she was awake.

“.....”

The girl only spared one glance at Chiharu before she turned away. She started to walk towards the exit of the dome with unsteady footsteps. The staggering gait of the girl reminded her of a zombie film that she had watched some time ago.

“Hey, wait up.....! I say, there’s something that I want to ask you—”

“In the end..... thou plan to stand in thy way, child of Elvioréne..... though neither of us has fully recovered our strengths.....”

Though Chiharu intended to call the girl to a stop, her shoulders shook from surprise and she froze.

The hoarse voice of an old man came from the girl. Although Chiharu couldn’t see her face, that deep voice was far removed from the girl’s youthful appearance. She started to wonder if the mutterings that seemed to crackle in the surroundings was even a ‘voice’.

“So be it, let battle be joined..... together with the child who protects the king..... we shall head by the king’s side.....”

Gooong..... The oppressive sound of a bell rang out from somewhere.

“Y-you.....?”

Cold sweat poured from throughout Chiharu’s body. She could feel that the paradise, which was a picture of serenity till then, being defiled by an uncleanness in an instant.

“.....!”

Chiharu held her breath.

The girl had turned her way.

Her large gaping eyes encroached with darkness were peering at Chiharu with shadowy pupils, and there was a stiff wide smile on the face of the girl.

“Doth thou repent, girl with the lingering scent of thy past brethren..... But, fret not..... thou hast already fulfilled thy duty.....”

Exaggerated words came from the girl's mouth, as if she was a god granting mercy on the distressed.

“It is fine for thou to live as thou are, forgetting all that hast happened. That is thy duty..... for thou who hast been the previous Aria Varej.....”

The stiff smile on her face seemed to extend so widely that it almost reached her ears.

Chiharu's heart pounded heavily. Beating strongly with *dokun, dokun*, it shook her powerfully from her insides. —As though somebody was pressing for her to hurry up and recall the past.

The previous..... Aria Varej.....

Somebody's screaming voice seemed to cross past Chiharu's mind at the speed of light.

—Why..... why is it that I must forget about it no matter what!

The voice crossed past.

—This sky..... and even your face? I must lose it all.....?

And past.

—Then..... who am I going to become?

Chiharu knew whose voice it was.

It was her own..... the voice of Chiharu when she was still young.

“.....”

However, she still couldn't recall it.

—It's fine, even if you can't remember that.

Chiharu felt like she heard somebody's ironic voice. With that voice, the

memories of her own voice that were brought back vanished.

Huh.....? Right now, what was I.....?

Leaving behind Chiharu who stood on the spot befuddled, the long-haired girl descended the escalator.

“Ah! W-wait for me! Just now, what do you mean by that—”

She promptly chased after the girl.

But—.

“Eh? Huh?”

The back view of the girl suddenly disappeared after she descended the escalator.

At the same time, the choking atmosphere of the surroundings reverted back to that of the fresh air.

Chiharu dashed down the escalator and exited the dome.

Looking around the vicinity, the figure of the long-haired girl was gone all the same.

“Ah.....?”

In replacement, she saw another person’s figure.

Opposite the plaza, she saw a familiar face heading down the slope leading to the underground parking lot of Urban Tower.

“Chami-chan?”

It was Konomura Chami.

She was walking along with a smile on her side profile while holding a long object in her hands that she probably picked up somewhere—a spanner used for construction. However, in Chiharu’s eyes, Chami looked as if she was furious. Also, it was no ordinary level of fury. It looked as though she was headed towards a fight that held her fate on the line—.

“.....”

Chiharu briefly ruminated. However, disregarding the hesitation swirling in

her heart, her body moved before her.

Heading for the underground parking lot, Chiharu kicked off her feet.

4.01 The Others

A heavy silence hung in a certain suite on the highest floor of the Imperial Hotel.

Staring at Shiika seated on the sofa were the same few faces from a few days ago.

Seated on the chair opposite was Munakata Kaiji. Kandori Youichi sat on the double sofa by the side while Sugitsu Matsuri was leaning against the fireplace with her arms folded just as a few days ago. They all had stern faces and were staring down at Shiika fixedly.

On the other hand, Reiji was staring out of the window in the sofa by the window.

“In the end, just three days were not enough to assemble the rest of the executives. They all seemed to have headed more to the south which was the original assembly point. They were also unable to stay for long as they have their hands full with overseeing their respective areas.”

Munakata was the one who broke the silence. He continued with his usual straightforward tone.

“That’s why, the only ones who can protect you are those of us here. —Being as *Aijisupa* does not have the intention to do so, the only one who can fight is *Sinica* as a matter of fact. *Halen* is unsuited for battles while I am completely useless in that regard as well. It would have helped if *Halen’s* sister was here, but it seems she remains uncontactable.”

“.....”

Munakata looked towards Matsuri and she only averted her face with an expressionless look. —It was obvious from her behaviour that the long-haired girl was lying, but Reiji pretended as if he did not notice.

“With that being the case, I would like to remind you once again..... please refrain from leaving the hotel on a whim like the other day. Even though we are

far away from Akamaki City and Ouka City, the fact remains that you are being actively pursued currently.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Shiika huddled her shoulders apologetically. That figure seeming like it belonged to an ordinary girl made it unthinkable that she was in fact an exceedingly powerful Mushitsuki designated as Rank 1 Secret class.

“As long as you bear that in mind from now onwards.How is it going, have you memorised the information?”

“E-erm..... sorry.”

Shiika apologised again.

Having stayed by Shiika’s side most of the time these three days, Reiji witnessed how she desperately tried to memorise the information. But, with that amount of information, it seems that one-third was her limit. In the first place, this kind of memorisation task may not have been suited for her. To Reiji who committed all the information to his memory within an hour, the wirings in their brains couldn’t be any more different.

“Hmm.....”

Munakata remained silent, while Youichi and Matsuri openly heaved a sigh.

Shiika clenched her fist that was placed atop her knees and bore their stares motionlessly.

“.....”

The irritation in Reiji’s heart shot up.

There should not have been any need for Shiika to apologise at all. Those of them from Mushibane had willingly said that they would protect Shiika. The ones who had one-sidedly pushed the information to Shiika for her to memorise were them as well. She should have refused them in the first place if she could not do it..... at least that was what Reiji would have done. And if it was Rina, she would have classified things into what can be done and what cannot be done and choose the best option.

Rina..... why would you call someone like that your friend?

As long he does not understand why, the only thing Reiji can do was to watch over Shiika's action. That was what Rina had requested him to do.

The thing that neither Rina nor I have..... just what is it?

Despite putting up a mask of indifference on his face, irritation welled up in Reiji's heart. He had never felt his emotions getting so worked up before. It was as if something invisible was stimulating his emotions, and he could not get his worked-up feelings to calm down.

"Tch....."

He clicked his tongue softly such that no one could hear it.

Opposite Reiji who was like that, Munakata took a deep breath and inquired in a formal tone.

"Snow—no, seems like it is still too early to call you that. Anmoto Shiika. I would like to hear the answer to our conversation a few days ago. Would you be our leader?"

"....."

Youichi and Matsuri frowned. It seemed like they had yet to change their opposing opinion regarding the matter. But, perhaps they had been notified by Munakata earlier, as they do not seem to have the intention of speaking out.

Shiika seemed to be pondering and remained unspoken. Then, she slowly lifted her head.

"What does it mean, to be Mushibane's leader?"

Her tone was not strong; however, it was not weak either. Her voice was soft, but resounded in the quiet room clearly.

"....."

Munakata, Youichi and Matsuri all turned their gaze towards Shiika silently.

"If I do become as such, then what do I have to do?"

Reiji too looked towards Shiika. The small-statured girl looked at Munakata calmly.

"If this is something I must decide no matter what..... then, I can't do it. It

might be selfish of me to say this after you have helped me, but it is impossible for me..... After all, I am different from Rina, I do not have the will to lead people.”

“What if I said that I want you to fight along with us?”

“Fight.....”

Shiika lowered her gaze.

“What do you mean to fight..... Just what should we be fighting against?”

“Obviously, it’s the SEPB!”

Youichi could not bear any longer and shouted out.

But, Shiika remained unmoved. She only revealed a sad look and slightly creased her eyebrows.

“In that case, I’m afraid..... I can’t do it.”

“Why is that.....”

Matsuri leaked out a hoarse voice. Her linked arms shuddered faintly, and tears gathered in her eyes. She glowered at Shiika with anger in her eyes.

“Aren’t you very strong! As much so as *Lady*! Yet, why do you not want to fight? Don’t you loathe the SEPB? Aren’t you mad that they killed *Lady*? Haven’t you yourself have been subjected to some horrible treatment by them? Don’t tell me that you don’t hate them at all! Then, fight! Along with us! Just as *Lady* did!”

“Rina was—”

Shiika started to speak, but closed her mouth. However, she raised her face determinedly once more and asserted bluntly.

“I think that..... Rina was mistaken.”

Everyone present had their eyes shocked wide open.

“I think that Rina actually realised that herself..... after all, she was in doubt too. However, she could no longer turn back..... but, she definitely realised it in the end—”

—I'm gonna head to Ouka City.

By the time he met her coincidentally that day—no, she must have specifically come to inform Reiji. For the sake of letting him know about her determination, to let him know that she had made up her mind.

“W-what..... are you.....!”

“You.....!”

Youichi and Matsuri got up from their seats.

However, a loud *gotan* sound stopped the two's movement.

Reiji had gotten up from the sofa. Without any expression on his face, he headed straight in a line for Shiika. He violently grabbed Shiika by her lapels as she looked up surprised.

“Take that back.”

His expression remained the same, only his mouth moving mechanistically. — An alien feeling stirred in his heart, feeling as though his body was being stimulated by sharp needles, causing his body to rouse by itself.

Deep in Reiji's heart, he wished for Shiika to take up the role as Mushibane's leader as well. He wanted to know what kind of orders would she dictate, being in the same position as Rina was.

But—.

“You say Rina was mistaken? That her life had been wasted? Rina had called you a friend, and you would say that what she had done was futile?”

“.....”

Shiika looked back at Reiji's face. That sorrowful face made Reiji all the more infuriated.

.....You want me to watch over her actions, Rina? This is what you request of me?

“I didn't say that it was futile.”

“I told you to take that back.”

Reiji raised one of his arms. A white haze—a silhouette with long body and two mandibles followed around his arm. A *pushii* sound of gas being released came from his hand.

“Stop it, *Aijisupa*.”

Munakata grasped Reiji’s arm. But, Reiji was resolute. If she did not take back her words, then he intend to end her right here. Then, he would say this to his late friend, ‘You’ve chosen the wrong person’. —However, in the deep recesses of his mind that remained rational, he was wondering why did he got so worked up over such a thing.

“.....Munakata-san, you said that you detest me, right.”

Turning her head, Shiika looked at Munakata. In the eyes of the girl biting her lips, Reiji was not reflected at all, as if she did not even take him into her view. This caused Reiji’s head to chill instantly; if it’s now, then he would not even hesitate to kill the girl in front of him.

“I also detest myself too. Even till the end, I was still requesting for Rina’s help..... However, that wasn’t actually right.”

Shiika’s wavering gaze swept across Munakata, Youichi and Matsuri.

“But, even I..... detest all of you just a little too.”

Munakata and the rest were jolted.

“The one who was requesting for help was actually Rina..... after all, she had been completely driven into a corner. Unable to request for help from anyone, yet having to extend a helping hand to anybody..... That’s why she chose the wrong method of fighting right at the very end.”

“.....Those of us wanted to help Rina as well. To defend her.”

“For what reason? So that she can be your saviour?”

“I”

With that one sentence from Shiika, the faces of Munakata and the rest changed. The room fell into complete silence.

“Because Rina was strong..... that’s why she could not betray the

expectations of the people around her. But, actually..... Rina wanted to ask for help too. To cry, to laugh, and to find someone she likes..... to do things that any ordinary girl could do, did any of you even realised that about her?”

Shiika turned her gaze away from Munakata and the rest who were speechless and stared at Reiji.

“But, the one I detest the most excluding myself..... is you, *Aijisupa-san*.”

Reiji was startled. The normally meek and reserved girl was glaring at him.

“You were the only one who realised that, wasn’t it? That Rina was but an ordinary girl. And yet.....”

Even when stared at with a blaming look, Reiji’s expression did not change. However, he was unconsciously grinding his molars.

“If she had asked for help, I would have helped her. But, the only thing she asked of me was this—”

“That doesn’t matter.....!”

With tears gathered in her eyes, Shiika shouted out at last.

“Isn’t it weird that you would not help her if she did not ask for your help.....! What were you actually thinking, *Aijisupa-san*? Why didn’t you try to help her? Even though in reality..... you wanted to help Rina out so badly!”

“.....!”

Reiji’s head blanked out wholly. The hand grabbing Shiika’s lapels lost its strength.

I—.

His crumbling sense of reason and heightened emotions escalating against his will blended together, causing him to lose the capability to think.

“I cannot think that it was right for Rina to fight till her death whatsoever.....! To fight like that, I don’t want to do it!”

In the room where everyone kept mum, Shiika’s shouting voice reverberated.

—There’s something I must do no matter what.

Rina mentioned as such. She also said that that was her dream.

—Are you alright?

When Reiji had asked that, Rina had slightly lowered her gaze.

At that time, what was Rina really thinking about? What had he actually realised? Did Rina resented him for pretending not to have notice when he actually did? That's why she—.

—Someday, I'll make such a huge request of you that you would definitely regret it. And that will be something that would shake up your entire life.

Rina's request for Reiji to watch over Anmoto Shiika, could that possibly be her revenge towards Reiji—.

“Then.....!”

Matsuri unfolded her arms and shouted at Shiika vehemently.

“Then, what do you expect us to do! Do you expect us to do nothing even though *Lady* was killed? What kind of battle do you expect us to do!”

“That is.....”

This time, Shiika was tongue-tied and she bit her lips.

However, the stupefied Reiji did not even comprehend their exchange.

He was picturing in his mind a future in which the girl known as Tachibana Rina did not become a Mushitsuki, and did not become the leader of the organisation, Mushibane.

Rina would still turn out to be the popular figure in class, and he would only be able to gaze at her from afar. Then, Rina would occasionally come by Reiji's side to grumble to him. —All that came into his mind was that of such an ordinary everyday scenery.

Indeed, Reiji already knew all along that Rina was just an ordinary girl—.

An electronic sound rang in the room. It was the internal line.

In addition, a small vibration was transmitted to their feet along with a dosun.

“It's me. —What? A monster..... Oi? What's happening?”

Along with each tremor, the sound accompanying it seemed to be getting louder. Munakata and the rest got anxious.

“What’s going on.....?”

“It came from the front. They probably got the internal line as it was cut off halfway..... Something seems to be headed towards here.”

“The enemy..... is it the SEPB?”

“I don’t know, but their objective is most likely.....”

Unrest filled the air and the tremors transmitting to their feet approached. Shiika’s expression stiffened.

However, Reiji could not move his body at all.

As the tremors got more intense, his thoughts got more and more confused. He did not know what he should do, what he wanted to do, and what would be the right thing to do anymore.

“Uuuu.....”

He did not even realise that the moaning sound entering his ears was produced by none other than himself.

Suddenly, the entrance was blown apart along with a violent impact.

“Tch.....!”

Munakata retreated back and Youichi moved up front. By his side, a Mushi with a slender tanned brown shell appeared. It had thin upper wings and long antennas. The protruding mouthpiece featured rows of saw-like teeth. Its external appearance resembled that of a Longhorn beetle.

Matsuri too summoned her gigantic Ground beetle. But, its movement was slow, and it could not move much in the cramped room.

After the dust surrounding the entrance settled down, the figure hidden behind was revealed.

“Just..... one person?”

Munakata exclaimed in surprise.

The one who appeared from the destroyed entrance was but a lone man with a slender build. A mechanical goggle covered his eyes while a mask extending from his neck covered his mouth. His whole body was covered by a black suit, and the only his trivially cut short hair was exposed.

Next to the man who stood in a forward-bent posture, there was an irregularly shaped monster. Its carapace was separated into multiple sections, resembling that of a centipede. It had two heads which were red and blue respectively, and its huge mouthpiece took up the majority of its body. From the gapless rows of teeth, a green bodily fluid flowed nonstop.

The man with the goggles scanned through the room once.

“.....”

He stopped his gaze on Shiika.

“You bastard!”

Youichi set his own Longhorn beetle against the man.

The man took one glance at him. The red head of the centipede rised and tried to bite into the Longhorn beetle.

The Longhorn beetle accelerated all of a sudden. Leaving behind a tanned brown afterimage, it evaded the centipede’s teeth. It circled around the centipede’s back in an instant and bit into the man’s torso. It then killed its momentum and slammed the man into the wall.

“To rush in all by himself, what an idiot!”

“Don’t let your guard down, *Sinica*. There might be others—”

Munakata’s calm voice was cut off midway.

The sound of the Longhorn beetle’s body creaking resounded in the room with a *mekyaa*.

“.....”

The goggled man only looked down at the Mushi biting him without any change in his expression. The red centipede had bitten down onto the Longhorn beetle. Under its thin wings, the portions that were touched by the green fluid

released a smoke with an irritating odour.

“Ah—”

Youichi's face twisted.

The red centipede twisted its head, peeling the Mushi off the man. Even as fresh blood poured from the wound on his torso, the man's complexion did not change.

The red centipede released a shrill scream. Holding the Longhorn beetle in its mouth, it rushed into the room with overwhelming force. It rushed towards Youichi, smashing the dresser and the wall in its way.

“Ooo! Aaaaaaaah.....!”

Like a tank, the red centipede ravaged the room, ramming Youichi along with the Longhorn beetle all the way into the wall behind, smashing a hole in the wall. It then released Youichi and the Longhorn beetle out of the gaping hole, down tens of meter off the ground. —For a moment, they saw the injured Longhorn beetle spreading its wings. But, even if it managed to pick Youichi up from the air, it was no longer in any condition to fight.

““Halen!””

Munakata and Matsuri's shouts overlapped.

The blue centipede assaulted Matsuri's Mushi.

“Guu.....!”

Just one bite was enough to break through the tough shell of the Ground beetle. Unable to resist, Matsuri crumbled onto the floor palely like a doll with its string cut. —It did not look like her Mushi had died, but the severe injury had completely sapped her mental strength and she fainted.

The two-headed centipede let out a roar in the centre of the wrecked room. It swung its head around madly, pinning Munakata against the wall viciously. His head strongly hit the wall, causing him to lose consciousness and collapse on the floor.

The man was abnormal in that his expression did not change at all despite his injuries, but the strength of the two-headed centipede was even more

exceptional.

“.....”

The goggled man looked at Reiji.

The bloodlust radiating from the man’s entire body indicated that he would kill all who stood in his way.

“U-uuuu.....!”

Reiji could not even take a single step from that position.

He was grinding his molars which produced a *gachi gachi* sound, and his whole body was convulsing. His view was flickering, and he felt like he was in a stupor even now.

“.....*Hmph.*”

He could tell that the goggled man was laughing at him, scorning him. He probably thought that Reiji was so frightened that he could not move.

However, it was not that Reiji was frightened.

The man faced Shiika again.

The astounded girl who stood there motionlessly opened her shivering mouth.

“Y-you are from the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau?”

“You shall come along with me.”

He walked towards Shiika leisurely.

“If we fight here, your comrades lying on the ground are going to be implicated..... you know that, right.....”

The man was trying to erase all emotions from his voice—Reiji knew that even as he was seized in a fit. The man was desperately trying to contain his emotions.

Shiika looked at Munakata and Matsuri, and then at the large hole in the wall. Then, she turned towards the man. The girl who could be thought of to be frail was in fact fuming.

“I understand.”

She spoke clearly, and walked towards the man herself.

Wait—.

Reiji intended to call her out to stop.

But, the only sound that leaked out from his mouth was a miserable groan.

“Uuuu.....!”

It was not that he was afraid.

He had no idea about what was happening to himself at the moment.
Emotions that he had never experienced before tormented him.

What do I do.....? No, there’s nothing I need to do, all I’m going to do is to watch, that’s all! She did not ask for my help, and all that Rina even requested was me to be by her side.....! That’s why, even if she dies here, that’s just the end. I would have fulfilled Rina’s request!

His thoughts circled around in his mind.

B-but.....! Would Rina really be fine with this? Did she in fact wanted to ask for my help? I didn’t know anything..... no, I knew! She had always suffered all by herself..... Was that my fault? Was I the one who killed Rina? In that case, am I just going to watch as that girl dies here.....?

“Uu..... Uuuu.....! S-sa—”

Finally, Reiji’s quivering mouth managed to spin out words.

“Say that you want..... my help.....”

He finally managed to make out a soft voice that can reach Shiika.

Shiika and the man looked towards Reiji. —The current him probably looked so pathetic that he looks like he is about to cry..... looking so hopelessly uncool.

“If you do so, I will.....”

He looked at Shiika with imploring eyes.

The man sneered once again.

And Shiika—.

“.....”

Only smiled.

—Are you alright?

On the countless occasions that Reiji had asked that of Rina, that was the same smile that she had shown.



Reiji revealed a look of despair.

I see, you were always—.

Looking at Shiika's smile, Reiji understood.

"Uuu! Uuuuu.....!"

Right in front of the groaning Reiji, Shiika was brought away by the man.

You..... were always afraid—.

Tachibana Rina was always afraid. Afraid about having turned into a Mushitsuki, and about what was going to happen to her from then. Afraid of leading a huge organisation like Mushibane, and shouldering the lives of all her comrades, afraid of every single thing.

But, she still smiled despite all that, just as the current Shiika did.

You had always wanted to cry for help. And you always couldn't do that—.

"UU—"

How many minutes had passed since Shiika's figure completely disappeared. It felt as if only a few seconds had passed, and at the same time, it also felt like hours had passed.

Reiji widened his eyes.

"UU.....UoOOAAAAaAAAAaa!"

Like a beast, he strained his voice to howl out as loud as he could. He swung around his right arm on which a white haze had condensed. —A gust of wind grazed past the fallen Munakata and completely decimated the wall behind him.

"UAAAaa! GAAaAa! AAAAAAAaa!"

He swung his arm wildly, causing the room to be devastated. The ceiling was gone without a trace, revealing the blue sky. The bedroom looked as though a storm had passed through, leaving it in ruins. The carpets near the non-existent entrance smouldered, giving off an unpleasant scorched smell.

"Damn it! Damn it! Daaamn it!"

He wondered if he had gone insane—the miniscule bit of reason in his head informed him as such.

“What the hell is this! What’s wrong with me! Or Rina! Or that kid called Shiika! What the hell are they thinking! I don’t get it! I don’t get anything at all!”

Not caring about Matsuri who was collapsed on the floor, he rampaged in abandon.

“Is this it! Is this what you wished for, Rina! Your revenge intended to shake up my life? *Haa!* You’re right, I’m just hopeless! Because I already regret it! I regret not coming to help you!”

This emotion that he could no longer suppress and just keeps spiralling—it was none other than regret.

The words of the unfamiliar girl he met in front of the station yesterday swam in his mind.

—I say, did you ever had anything that you wanted to do up till now? Because you just seem to be so uninterested in everything. Have you ever had somebody you like? What about someone you hate? Have you ever been so angry that you wanted to shout out loud? Did something happened before that made you want to cry? Have you ever been hurt? Or have you hurt others? Have you experienced something heartrending before? What about something that made you feel pathetic? Do you have things you regret? What do you wish for in the future?

It was just as she said.

Reiji never had anything up till now.

Finding everything to be tedious, he did not even know what was he living for. Nobody was able to hurt Reiji, and he himself did not feel the need to be in contact with other people. He only lived his life going along with the flow and never really felt anything.

—You look just like a Fallen.

It was just as what that bespectacled girl had said.

For Reiji who never really felt anything, he might as well have been dead. Just

because he was still breathing, that indicated that he was alive. The way he was, holding no desires and feeling nothing was precisely like that of a Fallen.

“UOOoOOOooOOAAAAAa!”

As a result of the shockwaves produced by himself, his clothes were reduced to tatters. His hair that was held up by his headband was made dishevelled, making him truly look like a lunatic to anyone who passed by.

Reiji had never felt anything.

But—.

“OO.....! UOOooO.....!”

Running out of breath and his voice withering down, Reiji collapsed onto the floor on his knees. He grasped his right arm which had been injured from the aftermath of the destruction with his left hand. The white mist entwined around his arm let out a *pushii* sound.

But, he became a Mushitsuki.

That was after Rina had confessed to him that she had become a Mushitsuki.

“OOoO.....!”

He wailed. In the middle of the room which no longer resembled a suite, Reiji choked with tears.

At that time, what had he thought to himself?

Recall it.

That’s right—.

He had definitely thought of as such. As usual, he was being indifferent. It was the same feeling as when the two of them were on the rooftop with Rina grouching to him, and him only replying with a single phrase of, ‘I see’.

—If you said that you have become a Mushitsuki, then maybe I’ll try being one as well.

Why did he think that?

“.....”

After his fit of crying had ended, Reiji recollected.

Duty—.

Perhaps, it could be called something like that.

He had never needed anyone, and never let anyone rely on him. There was only one girl who would call out to him who was like that. And that girl had said so plainly.

—Do you know about..... Mushitsuki?

In truth, he had realised. At that time, Reiji had undeniably seen it. On the dry rooftop, there was a single drop of tear.

Ever since he was born, he had lived his life like air, merely going along with the flow.

But, a thought came to that kind of him.

That perhaps he had been born so as to meet this girl.

That he came into this world just so that he can do something for this very girl that was right in front of him, that that was his duty—his dream, or so he thought.

However, he did not know what should he do for that girl—someone like him, what could he possibly do for her. Even up till the very end.

“.....*Ku.*”

Laughter spilled from his mouth.

What duty, that just seem to make him sound like an idiot to anyone who heard him speak of it. Speaking of which, the word ‘duty’ made him recall another scene.

“*Kuu..... Kuhahaa.....*”

When they first arrived at Nishito City, Shiika spotted a cat.

It was a cat with its originally beautiful white fur stained with blood and on its deathbed. That cat’s mouth was curled up, as if it was laughing. —Right then, it seemed as though it was exulting how it had lived a life without regret, rejoicing at how it had completed its duty.

“Hahaa..... Aaahaahaahaaha!”

Even a cat like that was able to die with a smile.

—Listen to me, I want you to stay by the side of a certain girl. In the case that I fail in what I am going to do from now on..... I want you to watch over with your own eyes what that girl would do. She’s my important friend.

—So, you’re saying you want me to protect her? Is that for her sake?

—No, that’s wrong. You just need to stay by her side. This is for the sake of Reiji.

—My sake?

—I want Reiji to watch over that girl, Shiika. That girl has something that neither Reiji nor I have.

He recalled the conversation he had with Rina.

I see..... so that’s the case, Rina. You were giving me a chance. To someone like me who was just like a Fallen..... you want to give me a duty again. You knew that I would regret..... or is there another reason? The thing that that girl has that even you do not, do you intend on showing me that? Even at the very end..... were you trying to save me? Despite me not having helped you.....

“.....”

He could feel something trying to force itself out of his body which had run out of even the energy to laugh.

Even though it could not be seen by the naked eye, looking on the floor, Reiji could observe the shadow of a smoke-like entity escaping through the ceiling. The entity formed an outline of bee with defined wings and a needle in the air before dispersing.

“I am going to do it..... since this is something you have requested of me.....”

In the quietness, Reiji muttered. On his face, a calm smile had formed.

Who knows if it was because the thing that had afflicted him was purged. When he arrived at the conclusion, the whirlpool of regret trapping him evaporated away.

When he raised his head, all that surrounded him was debris.

Around him, there was nothing, and nobody.

“I’ll stay by her side..... no matter what happens. From now onwards and forever. —Jeez, Rina. That's so shrewd of you. If you ask me to stay by her side, doesn't the mean that I'll have to protect her?”

The regret was gone from within Reiji.

Rina had given him a chance, a chance for him to reclaim his lost emotions.

“Did you already know that I would be able to do at least this much?”

He grinned.

The sound of the debris being stepped on echoed in the devastated room.

—That's why, I have a request for you.

When Rina had asked that of him, Reiji had replied as such.

“Fine. I’ll listen to anything.....”

Hehe, he seemed to hear the Rina's giggling voice.

4.02 Chami Part 4

The *gokin* sound of metal twisting echoed in the damp underground parking lot.

“Huu.....! Huu.....!”

Taking deep breaths, Chami put her weight behind the spanner. With each push, the metal pipe bent even further, till finally it broke from its support and liquid started to flow from the pipe.

She paid the utmost precaution not to produce any sparks. With that in mind, she tried to complete the work as fast as she could.

“Huu.....! —Ow!”

The spanner slipped and fell out of her hands. Its front portion scraped across her arm, causing fresh red blood to spill.

“Haah..... Haah..... damn it, what kind of shitty job is this. How the heck do you expect me to do this? This kind of menial labour is just impossible with my physique.....”

Spitting out her gripes, she returned to work once more.

She had already completed her preliminary investigations regarding ‘URBAN’.

First off, this underground parking lot.

Although there were two separate entrance leading to this parking lot from the tower and the dome, the underground space was actually connected. Water and gas pipes stretched throughout the lot and there was also a boiler room further in.

In addition, the electric, water, gas, and other utility systems had pretty much been completed in the floors aboveground. Only a portion of the upholstery works which has not been completed, and in fact plenty of tenants had already started their preparations on each floor. It seems that the construction had met an impasse just right before the unveiling of the place.

The breakers for the power generator of the tower and the dome had been installed beforehand too. They probably intended to resume work whenever, seeing as how the large high voltage power generator appeared ready to operate anytime. Chami had opened one of the breakers to check, but she could probably have found that out through the power company. She must complete this 'setup' before soon.

"Haah, Haah..... this place sure stinks."

She was running around the underground parking lot and breaking the pipes lining the wall. From the portions of the pipe that broke, liquid spurted out stalwartly. The foul-smelling liquid formed a layer on the ground of the underground parking lot.

"Really, she sure thought up of something dreadful..... what a weird trait for her to take after me. That's right, after all, petty tricks like this are all I am capable of."

While muttering to herself, she walked with a splash to another location. She approached another pipe attached similarly to the wall and started to push at it with the spanner.

"....."

If there was even a small spark, that would be the last of her. *The End.* Chami's life and ambition, boring things like those would cease without anyone even knowing.

Using the principle of lever, she twisted the pipe from its joint. The bolt supporting the pipe broke off with a *pakin*, cracking the pipe. Gas spewed out from the crack in the pipe vigorously.

..... Chami grinned as sweat formed on her forehead.

"Kukuu..... Hahaa."

A heavy laughter rised up from her throat and she continued on her work. She was possibly high from the sharp odour coming from the surroundings. Or perhaps, the stress of doing such life-risking work had popped a few screws off of her head.

“I wonder if I’ll continue to do this kind of thing forever. This kind of cheap ruses which no one ever knows and notices..... Well, it’s not like I would be able to do much more than this anyway.”

She completed the work along with her self-derision and walked up the slope leading to the surface with tottering steps.

“If those leads at the centre of the story had seen my actions, they’d probably go, ‘Eh? You did all that? That looks really tough, isn’t it’. After all, I’m no more than just some small-time villain. I already knew that from five years ago..... ever since I looked up at that panel with you.”

After exiting to the surface, Chami took a deep breath of the fresh air. However, her hazy consciousness did not seem to clear up.

“.....”

She walked towards the tower absentmindedly.

Entering the entrance, she walked up the frozen escalator.

Chami had reached her limit using her ability on the youth around Anmoto Shiika and *Kanata*. Along with the multitude of other people that became her pawn under her Mushi’s ability, Chami’s concentration ability was greatly reduced.

She recollected the happenings five years ago dreamily.

After becoming a Mushitsuki, she was swiftly detained and inducted into the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau as a member, and it was then that she knew that she would spend her whole life serving the organisation. Losing both family and friends, Chami was left all alone in the world. Lacking any outstanding ability or talent, she despaired at her life that was left to the whims of others to use.

She had just been assigned to a meaningless mission a few days ago. Walking along the streets like an empty shell, she spotted a filthy bench in front of the station.

—*Kuhuu*.

There was a newly unveiled large department store in front of the bench.

Looking up at the large panel display installed by its wall was a character laughing.

It was a small cat.

That cat with a dirty exterior was irrefutably laughing at the screen. However, part of it appears to be crying as well.

Chami was surprised and looked up at the screen as well.

What was displayed was a ridiculously beautiful scenery.

An adventure film spanning the entire world. An out of the world fantasy. A love story with freedom and love as its theme. —All of which were stories that couldn't possibly be Chami's life.

—Kuhuu..... Kuhuhuu.....

Chami sat down next to the small cat that was shedding tears while laughing.

—What's with you? Are you laughing? That looks disgusting.

With a scowl, Chami said. When she touched its head on a whim, the small cat shuddered in surprise. Looking at that frightened form, it reminded her of herself and a bout of laughter welled up in her.Indeed, Chami was frightened as well. About how she had become a Mushitsuki. And how her life would end without her being able to do anything.



—You're shaking.

Chami materialised her own Mushi. It looks like the cat could see it as well.

—People like me are known as Mushitsuki. How about that? Aren't I revolting as well?

The cat lightly nodded. Then, Chami burst into laughter.

—*Ahaha!* What's with you? Even someone like you understand what I'm saying? That's weird, jeez..... Fine, I shall make you my very first servant. It wouldn't be bad to have you help out for SEPB's mission.

Chami could still remember what she had thought of at that time as clear as day.

That even a cat like this had its own wish.

And that it had its own thoughts.

And that its wish was the same as Chami's.

—Even someone as shitty as me may have a chance to shine as the main character someday.

She had a feeling that the cat held that same dream as her. The cat, which held the feelings of 'admiration', was just like a splitting image of her.

Just how high would she be able to climb till?

Just how close would she be able to get to the 'heart'?

Holding onto those thoughts, Chami shouted out.

—How about we trudge onwards together along this shitty life!

And then, five years passed.

Although their forms and places were different, the two owls had progressed thus far.

Someday, the main character shall be me—.

"It's time to stop this sentimentalism. If it goes on, it'll be just like the ending of the movie. After that will the staff roll and then goodbye? *Haa*, don't kid me!"

Dragging along the spanner with her heavy footsteps, she came to the ninth floor.

“There’s still more to come, we haven’t even reached the climax!”

The floor which was converted into an atrium served as both an exhibition hall and free space. The four sides were lined with shops, while elevators were located at the four corners.

By the time Chami reached the front of the elevator, she was already exhausted, and she plopped on the floor. The spanner which fell from her grasps hit the floor, letting out a light ring that echoed in the hall. The wall in front of her was glass-sided, and she could view the passageway connecting the tower to the dome.

Looking down from above, Chami kept a lookout.

There were two figures that were approaching the dome. It was *Kanata* along with a small-statured girl. She couldn’t see clearly due to the distance, but the face was the same as that of the photograph *Konoha* secretly took from the top-secret documents.

As expected, it’s *Fuyuhotaru*..... but what the hell are they doing, damn it!

Chami unconsciously slammed her fist into the glass surface.

“W-why’re they practically unwounded! God damn it! God damn useless idiots! Couldn’t they even do anything? Why do you think I planted my Mushi into him! Don’t tell me they were scared!”

According to her plan, the two of them, *Kanata* and *Fuyuhotaru* should have accumulated quite some wounds by the time they arrived here.

Kanata—she was able to grasp that the man was zealous towards his mission of the assassination of Horisaki Azusa.

However, she did not have any clues as to why was Horisaki Azusa chasing after *Fuyuhotaru*. She probably didn’t even treat *Kanata* as an opponent. That’s why, to *Kanata* who had lost his ability to make calm judgements due to Chami’s Mushi, there was only one option left for him. That was to capture *Fuyuhotaru* and use her as a bait to draw Horisaki Azusa out.

The place to draw her out would be here, at 'URBAN'. He would have figured out that Horisaki Azusa would be around here since this was where she disappeared a few days ago. And, it was probable that for *Kanata* who had lost his composure, he would not even report back to Headquarters as long as he had not completed the mission.

However, according to her expectations, *Kanata* should have fought against a certain youth when he was trying to capture *Fuyuhotaru*. The youth with a headband was supposed to be protecting *Fuyuhotaru*. The impression that Chami got from him was that he would have been quite a troublesome opponent.

Kanata was supposed to have fought the headbanded youth and get injured, as well as weaken *Fuyuhotaru* on top of that—that was her plan. She had already confirmed from *Konoha* that *Fuyuhotaru* did not have any will to fight.

She would then kill the weakened *Kanata*, and obtain *Fuyuhotaru* and Horisaki Azusa. But, from the looks of it, the chance of Chami being able to win against *Kanata* seems low. He was bleeding from his torso, but that only seemed to be a superficial wound judging from his firm footsteps.

“God damn it.....!”

Chami watched as the two of them entered the dome, then walked down the passageway leading to the tower after a while. —Chami had already confirmed that Horisaki Azusa was not in the dome. Their actions were as she had expected.

However, she saw the figure of a youth walking into the premises alone all of a sudden.

It was the youth with the headband.

It seems that he had noticed the two people walking down the passageway. He scratched his head and then headed towards the tower with a composed look.

Chami reflexively patted her chest.

“So that’s it..... they haven’t even fought? You’re late. But, well, fine. This result is alright.”

She released a sigh with a *haah* and looked towards the ceiling.

“The actors have all gathered, don’t you agree, *Owl*?”

She stood up with a grin and took a lighter out from her pocket. It wasn’t any cheap lighter, but an electric ignition type oil lighter whose flame doesn’t go out unless one closes the lid. With the thought that this would probably serve as a suitable incense to offer up to her deceased partner, she had gotten the lighter.

Pressing the button, the door of the elevator opened. —Chami had checked the breaker for the power generator just for this purpose.

She lighted the lighter and threw it into the elevator. She watched the lighter roll on the floor of the elevator and pressed the button for the underground parking lot.

“Or would it be better to say that the stage had been set?”

With those words, she sat down once more.

By her side, the elevator’s door closed.

“*Huu.....*”

She breathed out and lowered her head.

Closing her eyes, she immersed herself in sentimentality once again. But, as she does so, an unforeseen voice called out to her.

“Hey, Chami-chan. What were you doing just now, ditching school for this?”

“.....!”

Thunderstruck, Chami turned around in a flash.

An unbelievable person was standing there. It was someone who was not supposed to be in this screenplay that Chami wrote. That girl was not supposed to be present on this vulgar battlefield.

Up till now, Chami had always been on high alert around her surroundings. That was because she was always cautious against having the SEPB realise her scheme. However, she cursed herself for the oversight that she had completely overlooked the one person that even till the very, very last she would not include in the casting list.

“A..... Ayukawa Chiharu.....!”

Similar as to when they had met in front of the station yesterday, Ayukawa Chiharu was standing there looking extremely carefree. On her slightly inclined face, there was a bitter smile.

“I was thinking about that, Chami-chan. But, if you did that.....”

Chiharu spoke with a troubled expression that looked out of place.

“.....Wouldn't this place blow up?”

Chami seemed to hear the sound of her scenario shattering into a million fragments.

4.03 The Others

The dry footsteps of the two walking down the passageway on the third floor resounded in his eardrums.

Even the sound of his own breathing under the mask sounded irritating to him.

“.....”

Kanata walked along wordlessly.

Walking behind him was the silent *Fuyuhotaru*—Anmoto Shiika. She was following him obediently without resistance.

—I.....

He felt all his senses sharpening till the point of a knife’s edge. It felt as if there were eyes and ears all over his body, and he could even perceive the flow of air on his skin. The wound he received on his torso had penetrated even his internal organs, but he could not even feel the pain now.

If it was now, he felt like he would not lose to anyone. Even to Anmoto Shiika who was behind him. Indeed, even against *Kakkou* or Harukiyo who were titled as the strongest Mushitsuki.

However, contrary to the strange lightness of his body, he could sense his thinking capability gradually diminishing.

—I’ll erase Horisaki Azusa. That’s my primary objective..... my mission. It was lucky that I managed to find *Fuyuhotaru*..... If I brought her to Headquarters, my assessment would probably increase..... But, that is only after I have erased Horisaki Azusa..... That was the order given to me. She would..... if I continued to fight for her..... Vice-director Miguruma would give to me the next battle..... and make my dream come true.....

With his eyes lighting up from within of his goggles, he passed through the passageway to the tower.

He roamed around the interior of the tower, but couldn't find his objective of Horisaki Azusa either.

However, there were no doubts that Horisaki Azusa was chasing after Shiika. As long as he kept her by his side, she would surely appear. —It was just a baseless conjecture that Horisaki Azusa was chasing after Shiika. But, *Kanata* was convinced of it. There was no longer any room for doubts in his heart.

—I am not wrong..... not, mad..... I'll massacre all who obstructs me..... For the sake of my mission..... for the next battle.....

Kanata did not realise that he had started to mumble out of nowhere.

"I am not mad..... massacre all....."

Behind him, Shiika had a face of incomprehension.

The third floor of the tower seemed to be intended for dining and clothing shops. Racks crammed with mannequins were lined up toting the latest bags.

".....!"

The sight of carvings on the side of the motionless escalator caused him to shake.

That had been done by *Kanata's* own Mushi. Memories of the bizarre white cat that he encountered here came into his mind.

".....!"

He turned to his right forcefully with *baa*.

He seemed to see something white running amongst the abandoned construction materials and vinyl sheets.

".....!"

He turned to his left.

This time, the white object seemed to have appeared there.

—*Kuhuu*.

The laughing voice of the cat echoed in his ear.

—Is that your duty..... your dream?

Someone whispered into his ears. That voice resembled that of his own.

—What would you be left with after that dream bears fruit? Continuing on fighting, would you be smiling after all that? Just as that cat did.....

“.....!”

He turned to his back.

But, he only found the petite girl whose shoulders trembled in surprise. Certainly not the laughing white cat.

“E-erm.....”

He ignored Shiika who was trying to say something.

“*Huuu..... Huuu.....!*”

Kanata took short breaths, trying to supply as much oxygen to his brain as possible. Mushitsuki—amongst those of the Special type, there were those who were capable of mental domination or contamination. He had practised this technique to maintain a clear cognisance so many times that he was sick of it.

It can't possibly be here.....! I have personally killed that cat with my own hand..... No, in the first place, that was only because of the high fever due to my wounds at that time..... there can't possibly be a cat like that. That was merely an illusion that was born from a chink in my heart.....!

However, for some reason, he could not seem to subdue the agitation in his heart as he could normally. It felt like there was something stimulating him from within against his will.

Why was it that the current him was panicked to such a degree. Just what was this feeling afflicting him. That, *Kanata* did not know.

“.....*Huuu!**Huuu.....*”

The throbbing sound of his heartbeat that seemed to drum in his ears caused him to grimace. He sat down on the entrance of the passageway.

From here, I would be able to see those who come from below in the tower, as well as those who approach from the dome. —To be able to think at least this much, it seems that there was still some reason left in *Kanata*.

Unlike *Kanata* who suddenly sat down on the spot, Shiika scanned her surroundings.

“Are you really alone?”

“.....”

“Aren’t you from the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau?”

“.....Shut up.”

Lifting his goggles up onto his forehead, he glared at Shiika fiercely. He probably had an abnormal glint in his eyes, as Shiika’s expression turned into one of fright.

“I am going to bring you to Headquarters..... But, before that, I am going to finish up my mission here. For that reason, I am going to make use of you.....”

Shiika’s countenance changed. She bit her lips and exclaimed.

“I am going to escape from here.”

“.....”

“Over here, I probably wouldn’t cause trouble to anyone.Also, I’ve made a promise with my friends. That I would not get captured by the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau another time.”

Kanata had seen this look that Shiika was making now countless of times. It was the face of someone who had been chased into a corner, and had made up their resolution to fight—however, that was not the resolution to defeat the enemy.

“.....*Huu.*”

Kanata breathed out and slowly stood up. Looking at the emotions in Shiika’s heart—those trivial emotions, his head became chilly.

“Escape, huh..... not to try to kill me?”

“.....!”

He knew that Shiika was shaken.

“In the battlefield, those who hesitates dies. You do not have the will to fight

at all. The only thing you have is naïvety..... do you really care so much for your opponent? You can't bear to hurt others or get hurt yourself? Or is it that..... it makes you remember about those you've hurt?"

The unease on Shiika's face spread more and more.

"You're so half-baked, *Fuyuhotaru*..... Truthfully speaking, I don't even care about the matters regarding you at all..... but, it seems like you have yet to realise that you stand right at the 'heart' of matters."

"T-the 'heart'.....?"

"It just means that you are special. Just by being around, you would cause fighting to occur with you at the centre. This is just how the country has always been..... are you going to be just as naïve when the battle begins? The naïve you who say that you don't want to fight, even being so naïve towards the enemy..... surely, you would give rise to even more conflicts. Someone like you would always be embroiled in strife no matter what....."

Kanata walked towards Shiika unguarded. Shiika retreated backwards step by step with a frightened expression—no, a look of discomfiture.

"Were you thinking that somebody would end the fighting someday? Someone other than you? Till then, how many soldiers do you think would die? Nobody knows, and nobody ever notices. Do those of you at the 'heart' think that they were fighting for your sakes.....?"

".....!"

Shiika's face twisted and she let out a groaned wordlessly. She seemed to have recalled something and looked like she was about to cry.

—Wrong.....

Kanata did not even know what he was saying anymore.

He had seen innumerable people surviving and dying in battles. Those included many of his allies who had died in vain as well, such as his team who were chasing after Horisaki Azusa and had been turned into Fallen. If Shiika had been the objective of Horisaki Azusa, then wouldn't that imply that their current condition was due to Shiika?

—This is wrong..... I have already realised it.

The barely remaining rational portion of his brain whispered at him.

I..... I, who have no worth apart from fighting, have already realised..... I had believed that Miguruma Yaeko would present me with more battles, and so I fought..... believing in her blindly, and now, all I can do is nothing but fight..... Despite knowing that I would die in the midst of a battle someday, even so I ended up being unable stop fighting..... And surely, that is what makes me the worst.....

Separate from his internal monologue, *Kanata's* mouth continued running by itself.

“I’ve met *Kakkou* once. He was an unpleasant fellow, but he was different from you. He had the resolve to end the fighting.....”

“*Kakkou.....-kun?*”

“I now know. These battles centred around you would surely continue without end. However, if it were to somehow come to an end, then surely..... that would have been the time when you yourself have made up the determination to end the fighting.”

Next to *Kanata*, the two-headed centipede appeared. It opened its huge mouth and faced its venom-dripping fangs towards Shiika.

“I am going to end the fighting.....”

“You who doesn’t have the will to do so, does not have the right to live. As long as you live..... worthless soldiers like me would continue to be manufactured. Believing in the words of someone who lies close to the ‘heart’, and becoming capable of nothing but fighting.....”

Seeking out battles.

Believing in Miguruma Yaeko who would present him more battles.

In the end, what was it that Miguruma Yaeko have given him? That is—merely nothing but a place to die. Nonetheless, *Kanata* can only continue to fight. Because that was the dream he bore, the only reason for which he exists.

People like me who hold such incorrigible dreams should just—.

“You are the same as Miguruma Yaeko.”

“.....!”

“Creating warfare everywhere..... yet have no intentions of stopping them.”

Shiika seemed to have received a shock and was frozen on the spot.

—That white cat was laughing.

Like *Kanata*, perhaps it had been assigned with a duty by somebody and had completed it.

However, it was different from *Kanata*.

That was, the cat had believed in the somebody who had also trusted it and gave it its mission, and it believed that that person would make its own wish come true. It had believed that that person would bring it along with them as they continued on their journey.

Kanata is unable to laugh as the cat did—.

“I’ve changed my mind..... you are going to die here.”

A hatred towards Shiika gushed up so intensely that even he was unable to hold it down himself.

He has already put what happened to him behind, after all, he could no longer turn back anyway. However, as long as the girl in front of him was around, pitiful soldiers like *Kanata* himself would continue to exist.....

“It would be brief from this distance. Before you can even use your ability, I’ll have no trouble snapping your neck. I was going to use you to draw out Horisaki Azusa, but..... at this point, perhaps a dead body would serve too. Once I erase her and complete my mission, I’m going to return to Headquarters.”

Kanata had no qualms doing so, even disregarding the fact that the Central Headquarters wanted her to be captured alive, and not assassinated. If it was found out that he had killed Shiika, he would probably be punished. But, his mission had only been to erase Horisaki Azusa, so long as *Fuyuhotaru* doesn’t appear in his report at all, that would be the end of it.

Shiika stood there with a pained expression, but let out an utter upon looking

behind *Kanata*.

“Ah.....”

Kanata turned around.

There was a person climbing up the escalator.

“*Aijisupa-san*.....?”

“Yo.”

It was the youth with a headband who was around Shiika's age. In contrast to his tattered clothes fluttering about, his expression was truly serene. His eyes which showed no hints of nervousness whatsoever even had tinges of sleepiness.

He was the youth who could do nothing but make groans while *Kanata* took Shiika captive. Unlike just now when he was paralysed with fear, he currently stood relaxedly in front of *Kanata*.

Kanata glared at the youth who was called *Aijisupa* with murderous intent in his gaze.

“How did you find us.....?”

“Even if I told you, you probably wouldn't understand either. Some uncanny monster that was following us around the past few days brought me here.It seems like I had been made use of by something.”

Monster.....? Is he referring to Horisaki Azusa?

Kanata pondered in his mind, but he couldn't be sure.

“What does the coward who could do nothing but tremble in fear earlier thinks he can do now? Get lost.”

“Sure, I'll do so once you return that to me. It's not like I have anything on with you either.”

Aijisupa said so with a bothersome tone with both of his hands stuffed into his pockets. That calm demeanour that was a complete reverse from before surprised not only *Kanata*, but Shiika as well.

“I am going to kill *Fuyuhotaru* right here. I'll only say it once more, get lost. If

you don't, I'll kill you!"

"Is there a need for me to repeat myself a second time too? Fine, I'll say this much then. Return that to me. I still haven't witnessed anything yet, it'll be troubling for me if she dies now."

"....."

"In any case, you just wanna fight, isn't it? Well, I was already prepared for this to happen."

Hearing him speak nonchalantly like that, the irritation in *Kanata* shot up. Just that small irritation in his heart was amplified by an invisible needle and it soon blazed into a rage in no time.

Grrrr..... A beast-like growl was being emitted from his throat. He could also hear himself strongly grinding his molars.

"You bastard.....! Is a coward like you who can't even fight saying that you are going to get in my way.....!"

Aijisupa only watched on calmly as *Kanata* got into a forward-bent combat posture.

"Coward.....? In my eyes, you are the one that looks like a coward."

Kanata's eyes widened.

—*Kuhuu*.

".....!"

He heard the laughing voice of the cat and hastily turned towards the centre of the building.

That was a sneer.

An apparition was laughing at the him who despaired over his own dream. The back of his spine was suddenly assaulted by a wave of coldness.

"?"

Aijisupa knotted his eyebrows in puzzlement.

Kanata clearly saw it with his eyes. He saw a white silhouette beyond the

escalator.

It was looking at *Kanata* in pity and sneering.

“G-grrrrr.....”

But, in the next moment, the apparition of the cat disappeared.

The emotion that had been magnified in *Kanata*’s heart—that was *fear*.

It was the fear that had been born when he saw the white cat laughing. At the start, it was so small that he didn’t even notice it, and now it grew so large that it broke him.

Right before *Kanata* lost his remaining sense of reason, the last thing that he saw through his bloodshot eyes was the flickering display on the elevator landing.

The display showing which floor the elevator was on changed. It descended from the ninth floor to the eighth, then to the seventh and so forth. It flashed past the third floor which they were on, and stopped at the second basement level—where the underground parking lot was.

—In the next moment, a large tremor shook the whole of ‘URBAN’.

“.....!”

Kanata, *Shiika* and *Aijisupa* all lost their balance.

The scene of the glass walls on the first floor shattering into millions of pieces could be seen out of the window. At the dome, there was truly a great explosion. From the sealed interior, everything was blasted outwards towards the walls and the ceiling. A large blaze licked the outside from the broken windows.

Things did not end there for the tower which *Kanata* and the rest were in. A shockwave naturally propagated upwards from the first floor. The glass windows of the passageway was not spared either, and shattered with the fragments scattering outwards.

“.....!”

Kanata got up and scanned over the disaster scene, confirming that *Aijisupa*

had gotten up promptly as well.

The sky which was darkening due to the arrival of dusk was instantly dyed bright red. A huge wave of heat blanketed the area, causing them to feel like their hair were getting singed.

This smell..... gas? And also, gasoline! Did the explosion come from the underground parking lot! At this rate, the fire will soon consume the first floor and above.....!

“G-grrr.....!”

His growl getting deeper, *Kanata* glared at *Aijisupa*.

“You bastard! How dare you pull such petty trick.....!”

“It wasn’t me. In fact, shouldn’t it have been you?”

Aijisupa’s words of denial didn’t even enter *Kanata*’s ears anymore.

—*Kuhuu*.

He heard the cat’s laughing voice again.

That dealt the final blow to *Kanata*’s reason. He pulled down his goggles over his abnormally bloodshot eyes.

“Wai-..... looks like he’s not listening anymore, huh. —Shiika! Go up from the stairs further in pronto! The shockwave should have settled down already!”

“B-but! What about *Aijisupa-san*—”

“Nevermind that, just go! You’ll just be a hindrance!”

Shouting out those words, *Aijisupa* smiled once again.

“You felt like you wanted to be punished, huh..... I get what you mean, Rina. That’s precisely how I feel right now. Perhaps it would be good for me to feel some pain as well.....”

He muttered to himself. That voice should have reached at most *Kanata* without Shiika hearing it.

“Grrraaaaah!”

Raising a roar, *Kanata* rushed at *Aijisupa* with his Mushi.

4.04 Chami Part 5

‘URBAN’ was burning.

Chami was the one who did it. No, she had just executed the strategy thought up by her partner, and it had ended up as such.

“.....”

“.....”

On the ninth floor, the shockwave and heat were not that intense. Only the quaking was strong, and Chami and Chiharu both could not maintain their balance.

Unable to stand, the two of them stared into each other’s face while on their fours.

Chami opened her mouth gobsmacked, while Chiharu being Chiharu, opened her mouth widely.

“Th—”

“Wh—”

The two of them spoke at the same time while in close proximity.

“T-there really was an explosion, Chami-chan! H-hey, what’s happening? Is this a prank?”

“W-why are you in a place like this! Didn’t I told you to stay away!”

“It’s dangerous here! We need to escape fast! T-this building wouldn’t collapse, right?”

“I can’t believe it! Why the heck is someone like you who’s absolutely, not the slightest bit related at here at this time.....! Is narrowly escaping from death a single time not enough for you?”

They grabbed each other’s shoulders, bringing their faces close together.

As Chami was fatigued from laying the groundworks for her plans, the

possibility of this happening never even came into her mind.

Chiharu gasped.

“Narrowly escaped death..... You mean me.....?”

“Why is it! Why are you here! For five years! Five years! She had always protected you! And because of that, she died! Even then, she was smiling! Don’t mess around with me, damn it! Was taking her life not enough, now you even want to ruin her setup! Damn it! God damn it!”

Chami was enraged at this situation where Ayukawa Chiharu was right here. So much so that she wanted to roll on the floor and throw a tantrum and wreck everything around her.

She had resigned to the fact that Chiharu, an outlier had interjected into her plans.

However, she was mortified.

Mortified at Chiharu who had made her way here. She wanted to curse at the fate and coincidence and everything else that had brought Chiharu here.

Chami’s partner (indeed, this fact she acknowledged now), the white cat had traded her life to serve her duty to Chami. Chami must answer to her dying wish no matter what. She still did not know even now why did *Owl* protected Chiharu till the extent of giving up her life. But, that cat did not want Chiharu to be exposed to the battlefield. Just this, she knew clearly.

She had hoped for the girl known as Ayukawa Chiharu to lead a youth of happiness, without knowing of anything.

“Damn it! Give me back—”

Give me back her life!

She wanted to shout that out, but she stopped. Grasping onto her lapels like that, her arms trembled.

She thought that if she had said that, that would have really meant that her partner had really lost her life in vain. *Owl* had died with a smile. In other words, that meant that *Owl* had been satisfied with her life. More so than anyone else, Chami herself must never deny that.

That's wrong—.

Chami bit her lip so hard that it tore, causing blood to flow.

The one who had let down was me..... I didn't even notice Ayukawa Chiharu tailing me!

The intense chagrin caused tears to well up in her eyes.

Chiharu murmured dazedly.

“Always protected me.....? Died.....? H-hey, what are you talking about? I don't understand it at all.....”

“.....*Tch.*”

Clicking her tongue, Chami released her hands from Chiharu.

“It's nothing, I was just venting some anger. Forget what I just said.”

Speaking over her shoulders, Chami took the spanner and stood up. Looking out of the window, the darkening skies were a burning red.

The dome was wholly burning as a result of the explosion. Looking at the current state of the dome, it was probably futile to try to stop the fire; the only thing they could do was probably to wait for the fire to die out.

The tower in which they were in was probably the same, the sea of fire had probably spread from the first floor to the second. The fire would gradually creep up to the higher floors, where it would eventually reach the floor of the 'second explosion' in accordance to Chami's plan.

“You said five years, didn't you? Yes, you definitely said that! Does Chami-chan know how I was like five years ago?”

Chiharu grabbed Chami's shoulder and forcefully turned her around to face her, causing Chami to scowl. Chiharu had a desperate look on her face.

“Huh? How could I possibly know that kind of thing, you were probably just a little brat?”

“.....”

Hearing her reply, Chiharu was dejected. Her shoulders sagged as she faced Chami.

“I see..... that’s probably the case.”

“What’s with you. Asking other people about yourself..... you suffering from memory loss or something?”

“.....”

“Seriously?”

“Somehow, I only have vague memories from more than five years ago.....”

Chiharu said with a weak smile. Chami furrowed her eyebrows.

.....What was that? She really doesn’t remember? If that’s the case, could the reason for her surveillance by SEPB be within her forgotten memories.....? — No, that kind of thing doesn’t even matter anymore at this point of time.....!

She was supposed to have turned her back on the mission to monitor Ayukawa Chiharu after yesterday. Not to mention, she did not have any spare thoughts to consider about that currently. Chami changed her line of thoughts.

“Well, that’s not important right now. The only thing I know is that this is not a place for an ordinary person like you to be. There’s something that I must do no matter what, but if you promise me something, I don’t mind helping you out along the way.”

“Promise?”

Chiharu questioned back while coughing. —The fire might not have reached here yet, but smoke was streaming up from the escalator. The heat was rising up as well, causing the place to feel like the inside of a steam bath. Their bodies were covered in sweat shortly after, causing them to feel uncomfortable.

“I want you to completely forget about what you saw here, including what I did. And then, you will return to your normal life tomorrow, return to that happy and enjoyable everyday life. —If you can promise me that, then keep by my side. There’s only one escape route left now.”

“B-but, just now you said that..... someone had died because of me.....”

An ironic smile formed on Chami’s face. Chiharu was probably a kind person. Despite never having even seen the face of that ‘someone’, she looked like she was about to cry. It seemed like she unquestionably believed in what Chami had

just said.

“Forget that as well. You don’t need to know anything about that.In the first place, it’s not strange for that to occur to us anytime at all.”

“.....”

“Dying without anybody even knowing, that’s just the fate of our shitty life. Fighting as we please, winner takes all and the losers have nothing left. It’s just like that.”

Chiharu only stared back speechlessly at the grinning Chami.

“Don’t leave my side no matter what, okay.”

Chami walked towards the escalator in the middle of the dimly lit environment muddled by smoke. The smoke merely accumulated around the ceiling, and did not impeded their breathing. The sound of the spanner being dragged on the floor resounded in the atrium.

“.....”

Chiharu followed behind Chami silently.

Chami stopped right before the escalator and carefully scrutinised the state of affairs of the lower floors.

.....Could they possibly have used the staircase? No, *Fuyuhotaru* should have been the only one using it. Those two shouldn’t have the leeway to do so while they’re fighting. They’ll probably pass through here once the fire gets unbearable. Or possibly, could they have already settled the fight before they even reach here.....? Oh well, as long as that’s after *Fuyuhotaru*. The problem is, will the ones who pass by here be those two, or perhaps.....

At the lobby that functioned as an atrium, Chami directed a sharp gaze at the escalator. She silenced her breath, with Chiharu following her lead and muting her breath.

“H-hey, Chami-chan. Is this really your doing? What did you do?”

Chiharu asked gingerly.

“Nothing much.”

Chami replied while maintaining vigilance over the escalator.

“On the roof, there’s a pump for the water pipe in which some shitty gasoline was mixed in. That’s why, all I did was break the water pipes that were in the underground parking lot, releasing it underground. Actually, the density of the gasoline is lesser than that of water which prevents it from sinking down, but once I broke the underground water pipes, the water pressure naturally forces the gasoline down. In doing so, that means that it is in the water pipes on each floor as well. By the way, there was a boiler room underground which means that there were gas pipes too. After trashing those, I was able to make everything go up in a bang just by lowering a lighter down the elevator.”

Of course, the one who had mixed the fuel into the pump installed onto the ground of the rooftop was not Chami. That had been done by *Owl* who was chased into a corner by *Kanata*.

If Chami hadn’t seen that, she probably wouldn’t have thought of such a foolhardy plan like this. However, that cat had done precisely that, as if she knew that if it was Chami, she would have definitely understood her intention. She trusted in Chami without a single shred of doubt.

“The explosion should have only engulfed the first floor at most. But, that would have totally sealed off the escape route. Those people left here would have no choice but to climb up in order to evade the flames. Also, the fire wouldn’t stop any time soon. Why is that? That’s because the water pipes of each floor are filled to the brim with the fuel.”

The sound of sirens approached in the midst of the fire crackling. As they were in the city centre, the fire brigade had arrived swiftly. However, the intensity of the fire was growing one-sidedly just as Chami had expected. It was already too late to extinguish the fire.

“W-what are you doing this for? Those people.....?”

“For what you ask? Hah, that’s what truly none of your business. This is a battle that has not the least bit to do with you.”

Chami laughed undauntedly.

“That’s right. I have manoeuvred around without anyone’s knowledge these

five years all for the sake of now. From collecting information, to mastering my ability and undergoing combat training all these time.....! All for the sake of grasping everything in my hands! I haven't let these five years that she bought me gone to waste!"

After *Kanata* and the headbanded youth have ended in mutual destruction, Chami would then get ahold of both *Fuyuhotaru* and Horisaki Azusa. Whether be it the Central Headquarters, or Mushibane or any other powers, Chami, whom nobody even bothered to look at till now, would arrive at their desired 'heart' of the Mushitsuki before them.

Chiharu swallowed a gulp, listening to Chami wordlessly. She probably did not get a single bit about what Chami was talking about.

"Without anyone's knowledge..... that's what you said earlier too, Chami-chan."

Chiharu spoke out softly all of a sudden. Chami turned around.

"Ah? I did say that. Is there anything wrong about that? To you..... to the you who would be the main character no matter where you are, those words have nothing to do you."

"It may seem weird for me to say these words now when we are in this kind of situation, but..... I really want to be your friend, Chami-chan. Yes, there's no doubts about it."

"Huh?"

Chami made a mystified face at Chiharu who was nodding continuously while grunting affirmatively.

"I was speaking the truth there. Why are you saying this kind of idiotic things at this time. Don't even bother. If you trust in someone like me so easily, you're gonna get used and thrown away by others disposably."

"Is that so? But, it's not like that."

Chiharu smiled with a grin. —Being in this situation where they were surrounded by smoke, the skies outside of the windows were stained red with fire and the sound of destruction impending from below. Even as they were in

this kind of situation seemingly disconnected from reality, Chiharu's smile flashed brilliantly. That bright smile showed without any doubts that she was indeed the story's lead.

".....*Haah.*"

Chami laughed contemptuously and averted her eyes from Chiharu. Faced with Chiharu's smile, she could feel the smallness of her existence compared to hers.

.....*Owl.* Your these five years were not a waste. Ayukawa Chiharu is still living and smiling even now. So long as she lives, you can sing praise about the shitty life that you've had.

"It's impossible. You and me, we live in completely different worlds."

"Ah, are you feeling shy? I guess that can't be helped, seeing as Chami-chan probably doesn't have many friends."

"Go mind your own business. How can you still smile in this situation? Have you gone mad from fear? Or is it that your generation can't tell the difference between a game and real life anymore?"

"You are smiling as well, Chami-chan. Same to you too."

In this life-or-death situation, yet the two girls were still smiling. On one hand, Chami was smiling fearlessly in hopes of surpassing those who lie at the 'heart'. On the other hand, Chiharu had been somewhat influenced by Chami, but her smile was a cheerful one which befitted her.

".....!"

The escalator below was destroyed by something like an explosion.

At the same time, the figures of two man appeared.

One of them was a lanky man directing a huge two-headed centipede. Only his short hair could be seen, as his other features were hidden by his goggles and a mask. However, he was releasing a strange growl like a beast, thoroughly destroying the installations of the floor below together with the centipede.

The other person was a youth wearing a headband. He seemed to be at a disadvantage, where he was evading all the attacks of the centipede using

wasteless motions with his battered body. On both of his arms, a white haze—resembling a long-bodied Stag beetle crawled around. Whenever he swung his arms, there was a *pushii* sound like that of gas leaking. Then, a shockwave cut through from the front of the staircase to the end in a straight line.

Chami and Chiharu peeked their heads over the edge of the escalator, witnessing the scene. Under the overwhelming destructive powers of the two, the objects and materials lying around the floor were torn through easily as though they were paper and vanished.

“.....”

Next to the speechless Chami, Chiharu looked absentminded. Rather than surprised, she looked more like her consciousness had been sucked into another dimension.

“.....*Mushi*.....”

Chiharu muttered with her eyes wide opened. —Her tone was not that of doubt like, ‘Mushi?’. She muttered as if she had seen it before somewhere.

“That’s right. Those guys are shitty Mushitsuki. Just as I am. But—”

However, Chami was too preoccupied to explain to Chiharu how she was different from them.

I’m the same as them? That’s outrageous.....!

Looking at the battle between the two, she could feel a chill running down her back. The scene could not simply be passed off as fiercer than she had expected. Especially *Kanata*, his strength was atypical.

T-those guys..... are that strong? Could they possibly be even stronger than *Kakkou*.....!

“Mushi..... tsuki.....?”

Chami grabbed the muttering Chiharu’s arm and strongly pulled her along. She took the opportunity while the two below haven’t noticed them to sprint up the escalator.

“*Tch*.....! There’s no turning back by now! I’ve just got to do it!”

Pulling along Chiharu's arm while heading for the upper floors, Chami shouted out. She tightened her grip around the spanner as well.

"Mushi..... Aria..... Varej....."

Chiharu's mumbling voice was drowned out by the sound of destruction echoing from below.

4.05 The Others

“GRRR.....!”

Something was growling from somewhere.

Kanata set the blue centipede upon *Aijisupa*. His Mushi further expanded in size. Currently, the red and blue centipede had swelled to several times the height of *Kanata*.

Raising a tremendous roar that seemed to burst the eardrum, the centipede opened its huge jaws and tore holes in everywhere including the floor and the ceiling.

“Kuu.....!”

The headbanded youth jumped away immediately from where he was, dodging the fangs that bit into that spot right after. However, the fragments of metal and glass blasted everywhere caused him to be lacerated all over his body. But, even as his blood scatter everywhere, *Aijisupa*’s composed gaze remains trained on *Kanata*.

Aijisupa pointed his left index finger in the direction of *Kanata*.

The air currents shifted unnaturally and a moist and chilly wind swept across *Kanata*’s cheeks. —This cooling feeling belonged to water droplets that had condensed from the air even as heat and smoke radiated from the floors below. An irregular-shaped Stag beetle made out of mist standing on *Aijisupa*’s fingertip opened its mouthpiece.

He thought he saw a red light coming from the youth’s fingertip momentarily.

“.....!”

Right after, *Kanata*’s view was dyed a pure white. The red centipede had reflexively served as his shield.

A shockwave swept over him violently.

The carapace of the red centipede was vaporised, and *Kanata* was smashed

into the wall behind.

As *Kanata* recovered from the defensive position he took when he was slammed against the wall, he saw the cold gaze of *Aijisupa* right in front of him. Having taken advantage of the explosion to close the distance between them, *Aijisupa's* fist loomed before *Kanata*.

However, the combat-proficient *Kanata* stooped his body and easily evaded the attack. He threw an uppercut towards *Aijisupa's* torso in counter.

But, before his fist reached the youth's body, it was repulsed by an invisible cushion. A white mist spiralled around the front of his fist. The white mist that condensed around his fist detonated all at once.

“GRRRR.....!”

A layer of white frost froze around *Kanata's* arm as he was blown backwards. The red and blue centipede cut in front of where *Kanata* landed, blocking *Aijisupa* from both sides.

Aijisupa calmly raised his arms and crossed them. A white mist accumulated around his thumb, index and middle finger. The next moment, a red light shot out from both of his hands.

The sound of something rushing out resounded from somewhere with a *pushii*. Condensed water droplets rained down upon the surroundings.

The released shockwave pierced through the two-headed centipede. The explosion did not just engulf the centipede, but also penetrated through the wall, leaving a large hole. The air within the tower was expelled out of the tower together with smoke and flames.

“GRRrOAAA.....!”

A loud groan overlapped with the howl of the centipede.

Even as the centipede was buffeted by the overwhelming impact of the shockwave, there were only light depressions on its carapace. The body of the half-crazed howling centipede further expanded in size as if it was a balloon injected with air.

“.....You monster.....!”

Aijisupa spat out disgustedly.

“*Grraa.....! RuUOAA.....!*”

Kanata ‘calmly’ analysed the ability of the youth in front of him.

He estimated that they must have reached around the eighth floor. The white mist that was wrapped around *Aijisupa*’s arms, as well as the water droplets formed right before the explosion and the red light from his fingertip. Lastly, the invisible barrier around his body—all those were probably the effects of *Aijisupa*’s Special type Mushi.

Water vapour.

Kanata was certain that that was the true form of *Aijisupa*’s ability.

The youth was able to manipulate the water vapour scattered in the air using his ability. He was able to compress it into a wall to deflect attacks, in addition to causing it to expand in an instant, cooling it and turning it into a liquid. All these were made possible by a heat source within his fingertip.

He collected the cool water vapour in the air, and applied a strong heat source with a large temperature difference to it. That rapidly vaporises the condensed water into steam, causing an explosion—commonly known as a steam explosion. It was also probably due to the intense heat source in his fingertips used to rapidly vibrate the water molecules, that water vapour condenses around his arms due to the temperature difference, forming a mist coiled around his arms.

“*GRRoAA.....!*”

What a troublesome foe. On top of that combination of offence and defence, it had huge destructive capabilities. However, it seems like he is unable to do both compress and release, and expand the water vapour at the same time. *Kanata* would have to shift between attacking and guarding, while waiting for him to make a misstep.

—That was the tactic that *Kanata* would have come up with, up till yesterday that is.

But, the current him had no need for such approach.

The carapace of the roaring centipede was repairing itself right in front of his eyes. With acid drool dripping from its large maw, it could even swallow up *Aijisupa* completely just by opening its jaws now.

“.....!”

Aijisupa covered his face with his hand.

The blaze had reached up till the ninth floor. The headbanded youth spared a single glance at *Kanata* before turning around and dashing up the escalator.

You think you can escape.....!

“GRRa!”

Kanata jumped onto the red centipede. The blue centipede bit into the escalator and continued to chew it all the way up till the tenth floor.

Aijisupa carried on running up the escalator.

Kanata too continued to chase the youth, while destroying the pillars and the escalator along the way.

After ascending a few floors, *Aijisupa* ambushed *Kanata*.

“Go to hell!”

He raised both of his hands which had a large volume of white mist accumulated in *Kanata*’s direction.

Water droplets rained over *Kanata*.

As a result of the steam explosion, the tower crumbled from above to below. Together with the flames rising from below, they consumed *Kanata*.

However—.

“GRRroAAAaa!”

His goggles cracked, mask torn, and his whole body covered by burns, even so, *Kanata* could not suppress his raging emotions.

The two-headed centipede crawled out from within the flames. Its two heads assaulted the petrified *Aijisupa*.

Aijisupa dodged the fangs of the blue head by a hair’s breadth. However, he

did not manage to evade the fangs of the red head in time. Sharp fangs sank into *Aijisupa's* right shoulder, crushing his bones. The smell of skin being burnt by acid filled the air.

“*Guaaah!*”

The youth's scream of pain echoed in the tower. *Kanata* jumped down from the back of the centipede, grasping the youth's neck with his hands trying to choke the life out of him.

“.....*aAAAAAAA!*”

Aijisupa's scream turned into a war cry. White mist started to spew out from the mouthpiece of the red centipede biting into the youth's shoulder.

“*I!*”

The red centipede swelled up with a *bokon*. The steam explosion was discharged from within the red centipede. Its inside was unable to contain the massive pressure, causing it to rupture from within, scattering it everywhere. The damage inflicted on his Mushi rebounded onto *Kanata*, causing his chest to experience a sharp pain.

.....I will fulfil my duty—.

Kanata stared with his eyes wide open at *Aijisupa* who looked composed despite being injured. He touched *Kanata's* flank with his left hand, his bloody right arm hanging limply.

“So this is a fight till death.Even though I didn't have any intentions of killing you.”

“*Grr—*”

A red light flashed from *Aijisupa's* left hand.

The instant *Kanata* felt a chill on his torso, his world started to spin.

Being hit right in the abdomen at point blank by the explosion, *Kanata* was sent flying tailspin through the storey, slamming into a support pillar.

“*Haah.....! Haah.....!*”

Clutching his strengthless arm with his left hand, *Aijisupa* stooped onto the

ground on one knee.

“That was intense..... is this going to be the norm from now onwards? Is this what it means to remain by her side—”

Aijisupa's bitter soliloquy as he was gasping for breath was interrupted all of a sudden.

.....I will execute my mission..... and then, the next mission..... I will continue to fight..... for that is my duty—.

“*GRRR.....*”

Kanata slowly got up. He confirmed the sensations of his limbs, that they were still moving properly. There was no particular impediment.

Kanata, who was completely soaked in blood from his body to his feet as well as his suit, glared at *Aijisupa* hatefully.

.....Give me battles..... to the next battle..... and the next.....—.

His fury was so great that he bit his molars so hard they cracked.

“*GRRR.....*”

He had realised that the groaning voice he heard for a while had come from himself. —There were no doubts about it. There was something inside of him that was rousing him up. That *something* had messed up his internal wirings, causing him to go mad.

“How are you..... still alive.....? With that kind of injuries.....”

Aijisupa muttered hoarsely.



Kanata was apoplectic.

As if just that white cat alone wasn't enough, now even the boy standing in front of him was obstructing him. This made *Kanata* intolerably infuriated.

What's more was the *something* that was plaguing him. That feeling was what was obstructing *Kanata's* mission the most.

Who the hell is it..... Who the hell is getting in my way.....! What have you done to me!

“GRrAAAAAAaa!”

I'm going to kill everyone that gets in my way!

Aijisupa!

Fuyuhotaru!

And also, the one that planted whatever in me, along with the one that blew up this building!

I'll massacre them all!

“GUOo.....!”

The blue centipede hurled itself towards *Aijisupa*. A white mist instantly came between the centipede and the youth, but *Kanata* ordered the centipede to break through nevertheless.

“OAAAAaa!”

Breaking through walls and smashing through pillars, the centipede rammed its way through any obstacles on the floor between it and *Aijisupa*.

The whole floor was collapsing.

The portion of the floor which had lost its support crumbled, swallowing *Aijisupa* down with it.

“.....”

Amongst the smoke and heat, silence descended upon the floor which was being consumed by flames.

The spitting flames from the floors below casted a long shadow of *Kanata* on

the ground. On the back of the shadow behind him, there was a flickering figure.

It gradually consolidated into a fixed shape, resulting in the shape of a bee with a stinger on its abdomen.

—Who would have known that the one you were chasing to be.....
Fuyuhotaru of all people.

The face of a girl smiling provokingly crossed *Kanata's* mind.

“I see..... It's you.....”

The one who have caused him to descend into madness.

The girl who suggested for him to come to this building so that she could make use of him.

Kanata finally arrived at her true identity.

“*Ouruuuuu! You bastaaard! So you were the one getting in my way! Everything was your doing!*”

He looked up at the ceiling and shouted. He then grabbed onto the blue centipede and it began to chew its way through to the rooftop.

Crushed under the wreckages, blood flowed down *Aijisupa's* head. His eyes were shut and he was collapsed with his head hung weakly.

The bellow of the centipede reverberated throughout Urban Tower.

4.06 The Others

Shiika was climbing up the smoke-filled staircase.

Right after the mysterious explosion, Reiji started to fight against the masked man, while Shiika left him behind. Reiji had told her to escape, but she had no idea where to go. She just did as she was told and aimed for the upper floors.

It appears that Reiji had made up his resolution to protect Shiika. However, that only served to stir Shiika's hesitation.

Up until now, Shiika had been protected countless times. The girl known as Shirakashi Ubuki had even gone as far as to risk her life to allow Shiika to escape.

—Just by being around, you would cause fighting to occur with you at the centre. This is just how the country has always been.....

The words of the masked man struck in Shiika's chest.

“As long I am around.....”

Shiika's face contorted as she ascended the hot and smoky staircase.

It was just as he said.

Shirakashi Ubuki and Reiji had both gotten injured for the sake of protecting Shiika. And yet, Shiika herself could not help them in any way. If she exerted her ability, everyone nearby would be caught up in her power which destroys absolutely.

“Daisuke-kun.....”

She recalled her promise with Kusuriya Daisuke.

—I hope that you can wait till next year. There are some things that I still have to do. And I won't be able to meet you until they're settled.....

That was what Daisuke told Shiika, as was passed on by *Kakkou*.

At that time, Shiika had thought of waiting for him. It was this promise that

had supported Shiika and enabled her to move on despite the multiple times she wanted to give up.

She recalled the words of the masked man.

—He was different from you. He had the resolve to end the fighting.....

He was referring to *Kakkou*.

Kakkou had been trying to end the fighting. He held the same dream as Shiika, but he did not run away and continued to fight.

“.....”

When she passed by a sign which read “16F”, her feet stopped.

Rina had fought. She had met a sorrowful ending, but if she was still alive, she would probably be fighting even now.

Munakata Kaiji had said as such: that Shiika was worthy of being the leader of Mushibane. That he wanted for her to fight along with them.

And lastly, Reiji. He had made up his determination to fight for Shiika’s sake.

—These battles centred around you would surely continue without end. However, if it were to somehow come to an end, then surely..... that would have been the time when you yourself have made up the determination to end the fighting.

The master of the two-headed centipede had said that towards Shiika.

“Is it the same for me too, Daisuke-kun.....”

She spoke out to the youth whose whereabouts she did not know.

“Is it not possible for me to just wait.....? Is there something that I must do myself no matter what?”

Fight—.

All those around Shiika had told her to do so.

However, Shiika had by no means thought that any of all the battles that she had experienced so far had been righteous.

They were all fellow Mushitsuki, yet they had come into conflict just because

of some small difference in viewpoints. The reason that *Kakkou* and Rina fought was naught but that the things that they shouldered were different. If they had just met as friends, they wouldn't have fought—.

Rina's death, and the majority of Mushitsuki who ends up as Fallen. These kinds of conclusion that was borne from fighting was precisely why Shiika cannot approve of fighting no matter what.

“I—”

To the Shiika who clutched her chest and raised her head, a strange sound could be heard.

Gooong..... it was the oppressive sound of a bell resounding.

The loud reverberation seemed to Shiika like it resounded throughout the tower, but she did not physically hear something of that sort. It was an eerie sound that seemed to shake the heart directly.

The sound continued intermittently. It seemed to come from across the atrium. When the sound rang out, the smoke and heat from the surroundings suddenly felt distant. In exchange, the atmosphere felt viscous and unclean.

“.....?”

Shiika looked towards the atrium that was lightly obscured by smoke.

With some hesitance, Shiika exited the staircase and entered the atrium.

Something was calling her over—she did not have a basis behind it, but that was what she felt. She could perceive that the sound was calling none other than Shiika to go over there.

Making her way through the smoke, she found a space in the middle of the atrium where the black smoke did not enter.

“Eh.....”

Shiika unconsciously uttered.

A lone girl was standing on that spot.

The girl was dressed in an attire made of thin fabric, her long hair was fluttering, and a smile was plastered on her face. Her lifeless pupils staring at

Shiika seemed to be dyed in a shadowy darkness.

“Wh-.....y.....? How.....?”

Shiika’s voice became blurry. Her tongue was shivering in her mouth which was covered by her hands.

“After all, that time..... you were.....”

The girl smiled smugly.

Her whole body was draped in a black fog. A small hornworm crept up her shoulder. In addition, there were many small cicadas clinging onto her legs and even her abdomen.

That girl was someone who should not have been around.

That was because, right in front of Shiika, that girl..... had been turned into a Fallen because of her power.

“Thou hast finally managed to have an audience with thee..... the king of Mushitsuki.....”

The girl opened her mouth. The voice that came out of that well-shaped lips was however that of a raspy old man’s.

No, even though she opened her mouth, there were no movements within. It only formed a smile with an unnatural curvature.

Shiika only stood there flabbergasted, unable to form any words.

“Hadst thou known earlier..... that thy child hadst yet to realise thine duty of protecting the king..... thou wouldst hast been able to meet thee hastier..... However, thou hast finally realised thy role..... from now on, thou shalt only be of use for thy sake..... thou can’t afford to lose thee in this skirmish.....”

“.....”

She is not the girl she knew—that was what Shiika’s intuition told her. Her external appearance was the same, but the personality inside was different. That was what she felt clearly.

“This vessel is thy temporary roost..... the other vessel who seeks thine king..... hast already retired from losing thine king.....”

“Wh—”

Shiika finally croaked out a voice.

“Who are you? You.....”

Facing something which she had never met before, Shiika felt some fear. But, even more so, she felt a small anger that had ignited in her. That *something* in front of her had hijacked the consciousness of the girl with no regards to the girl’s will—that was what Shiika was angry about.

“Thou hast come to..... question thy will..... to thee who hast the right to be king, thy will.....”

The black fog spewed unsteadily from the girl’s body. The outline of the hornworm became fuzzy, as if it was about to disappear anytime while barely hanging on to its existence. The cicadas exuded the same symptoms.

“Will.....? King.....?”

“What doth thee wish for from now onwards.....? Thee who hast resurrected from a fleeting death, bears the right to be king..... what dost thee wish for?”

Shiika swallowed a breath.

Fight—.

Shiika seemed to be hearing the voices of those Mushitsuki who had been turned into Fallen because of her.

The sound of a bell resonated.

The girl’s question carried a sense of oppression that disallowed her rejection.

Fight—.

The smoke rising from the surroundings and the black fog covering the girl manifested into the figures of the Fallen which encircled Shiika.

“I—”

Shiika’s feet trembled incessantly and she was cornered by fear.

Fight—.

All the dreams that had been crushed by Shiika prevented her from running

away. Wherever Shiika went, that place became a battlefield. As if to say that the battlefield was where Shiika truly belonged.

Shiika may have been able to fight as well.

Using her own strength, it may be possible for her to end the fighting.

However, that was the ending that Shiika feared the most—that the only one who remained would be her, standing alone amidst a mountain of corpse.

“I..... I don’t want to fight.....!”

She recalled the scene where all the Mushitsuki apart from herself had been turned into Fallen, lying beside her feet.

To her, that was the most dreadful scene.

“But—”

She recalled those who held the same dream as her.

—Am I really? Ahh~ I don’t understand myself anymore.....

—I promise you, I will never give up.

—There are some things that I still have to do.....

They all fought. Shiika tightened her fist.

“I want to end it.....! I want to end this kind of fighting!”

The sound of a bell rang out raucously.

The girl smiled so wide that it seemed like her face would tear into two. It was a smile that one made when one found the thing which they had sought for forever.

“In that case..... pursue that as thou wish.....”

Shiika and the girl faced each other.

“Then release thee and elucidate the truth..... Once thou dost so, thou shalt edify thee the reason why thee hast the right to be king, and why art thee the one and only one who resurrected from fleeting death.....”

“.....!”

“At that time, thou may then be able to bring an end to everything.....”

The girl’s smile became distant. Like smoke, the figure of the girl faded away.

“W-wait.....! Just who are you—”

“Thy name is Dioresutoi..... Unlike Elvioréne and Aria Vareï, thou wilt not go anywhere..... Search for thee..... if thou wish to bring an end to everything.....”

As Shiika ran forwards to her, the figure of the girl disappeared into thin air.

Along with her disappearance, the sound of the ringing bell dwindled until it eventually cannot be heard anymore.

“Bring an end..... to everything.....”

Shiika stood there in a daze, muttering softly.

She barely understood the meaning behind any of the words spoken by the girl who named herself Dioresutoi. But, it was clear to her that the girl was not lying at all.

Shiika just might be able to bring an end to everything.

She wanted to put a stop to the battle between Mushitsuki.

But, is it possible for her to do that.....?

Nevertheless, it is something that she must do no matter what.

This is something that she can’t leave to anybody else, something that only Shiika who is currently alive can do.

“I must do this no matter what.....”

Underneath Shiika who had established her resolution, a large tremor was transmitted through her feet.

4.07 Chiharu The Last

Chiharu was being pulled along by Chami as they run up the escalator.

Mushi..... Mushitsuki..... Aria Vare—.

The current scene she was saw through her eyes, and the words of the strange girl cycled back and forth in her mind repeatedly.

“Move your legs faster, you dimwit!”

She couldn’t even hear Chami’s rebuke.

—Then..... who am I going to become?

The voice of the past her echoed within her head.

“Who..... am I.....”

Chiharu’s muttering voice was drowned out by the sound of destruction.

Right after they reached the fifteenth floor, the ground on the previous floor they were at crumbled and collapsed below. Dust, smoke and wreckage flew everywhere.

“Tch.....!”

It seemed that this floor was set aside for restaurants. Glass partitions separated the space into fixed intervals, which hanged sign plates with the name of the restaurants in several languages. Some stores even had tables and chairs in position already.

A huge wriggling blueish black centipede emerged from the crumbling floor. Just its height alone was multiple times that of Chiharu. With its innumerable scuttling legs, its huge body alone occupied a whole section of the floor.

“GRRuoOO..... Ouruuu.....”

Along with its appearance, they could hear a beast-like howl.

The man riding on the centipede’s back glared daggers in their direction as if he wanted to swallow them up entirely. The lens of his goggles was cracked on

one side, revealing his bloodshot eye. His mask was also torn, exposing his canine teeth as he roared in anger.

“OuruuuUUuu! So you were the one getting in my way!”

That hollering voice that was even louder than the roar of the centipede scattered away the surrounding smoke.

“God damn it.....! Couldn’t that kid have tried a bit harder? I’ve already come so far..... if only he could’ve bought me a few more minutes!”

Chami stopped running and released her grip on Chiharu’s arm. She faced the masked man and raised the spanner.

“Fuyuhotaru..... and Horisaki Azusa, where the hell are theeeeey!”

“Who the hell knows! After all, I planned on taking my own sweet time to search for them after killing you! In any case, the only place that they could go is up!”

“GRRroOo.....!”

The man raising a growl did not seem like he was listening to what Chami was saying anymore. He looked to be heavily injured, with fresh blood soaking the lower half of his body. Yet, he was so angry that he screamed with all his strength.

The body of the blue centipede grew one size bigger. Its mouthpiece split into two parts, with a red centipede emerging from the other and staring at Chami ominously with its compound eyes.

“Looks like he’s at just about the right level of madness, but..... for Christ’s sake, why the hell is he still alive even with that kind of injury! Even that Mushi looked like it was half-dead just now! And it doesn’t look like it’s maturing..... could this be due to my ability?”

Spitting out words of curse, Chami pointed the spanner at Chiharu.

“Don’t just stand there blankly like an idiot, get the hell away from here! Unless you want to get eaten by it!”

At Chami’s shout, Chiharu came to herself.

“C-Chami-chan.....!”

Pinned down by the pressure she exerted, Chiharu took a step back.

Just what was I—.

Right in front of Chiharu whose legs were shaking and frozen by fear, the centipede hurtled towards Chami.

“As you wish, I shall deal with you directly, *Kanata*! You better thank me, you undying bastard!”

“*GRrOAAaa!*”

It was like a huge dinosaur was approaching her. The jaws of the centipede opened till its width was so large to the extent that it could devour something three times the size of Chami. It shattered through the glass and swallowed all the tables and chairs that got in the way of its charge.

Chami jumped to her side, barely avoiding those fangs. Its huge mouthpiece crashed right next to Chiharu who stood behind her. A gust of wind like that of an express train passing by blew across Chiharu, causing her hat to be blown away.

“.....!”

“Don’t underestimate me!”

Jumping up with a revolution from the ground, Chami dashed towards the man.

“Without using your Mushi, why don’t you face me yourself! Or is it that you are scared of a tiny girl like me?”

The swinging spanner was aimed towards the face of the man riding above the centipede. The man—*Kanata* received the blow with his arms with a look of wrath.

“You’re saying I’m scared.....!”

Kanata kicked at Chami. However, she instantly blocked it with the handle of the spanner. She was sent flying backwards as a result of their weight difference, but she caught her feet after recoiling back a few steps.

Her arms had probably gone numb, seeing as how her face distorted. But, she showed zero signs of backing down.

Chiharu could tell that Chami was desperately trying to maintain a close distance between herself and *Kanata*. It was probably because she would face the Mushi's attack if they were apart. Although the destructive power of the gigantic Mushi was devastating, as a result, it would drag its master, *Kanata* into the mess as well.

"I'm going to kill you! *Ouruu!*"

"Let's see you try!"

Right before Chiharu's eyes, the two of them were engaged in a fistfight.

No, it wasn't merely a fistfight.

It was a death bout.

The man made no wasteful movements at all despite losing sight of himself in his rage. His attacks were all aimed at the eyes, throat, medulla oblongata et cetera, vital spots of the human body.

Opposing him, Chami too did not have any shred of hesitation nor mercy. The tip of the spanner, currently bent till an L-shape, aimed only at the man's head or heart. There were no doubts that she was intending on ending his life in a single blow.

"Someone like you dares to dream of obtaining *Fuyuhotaru* and Horisaki Azusa! Those are my prey! They're not opponents that a mere accessory like you can handle!"

"What does a piece of shit like you know! Even for an accessory that was bound by a worthless mission for years, so much so that even the mission was forgotten! Even I have those worthless things like my puny pride and ambition! To be used by others my whole life, that can go eat shit! I will use of anything at my disposal! Not for the sake of anyone else, but all for myself!"

The two of them shouted passionately, baring their emotions as they fought to the death.

Chiharu hugged her quivering body as she fixed her eyes at the fight that was

unfolding.

Hey, how are you over there.....?

Perhaps it was a result of the lack of oxygen due to the spouting smoke. As her consciousness became muddy, her ‘narrating quirk’ emerged unconsciously.

Today, I experienced yet another peaceful day—or so I thought, but I was utterly wrong. This kind of battles..... were unfolding right by my side even as I remained unknowing. I finally know. I thought that I was living in happiness every day, but in fact, in places unrelated to me—.

A sharp pain assaulted Chiharu’s head.

—Unrelated to you? Heh, really?

Somebody whispered by her ear.

Chiharu widened her eyes.

It’s related..... to me? I, the Mushi and Mushitsuki..... Indeed, after all, I—.

“Don’t look down me.....!”

Chami’s screaming voice brought Chiharu back to reality. Slipping through the arms of *Kanata* who looked out over her, Chami strike at him with all the strength behind her body.

“I’ll make any and everyone prostrate before me!”

A dull sound rang out with a *dosuu*.

The spanner with Chami’s whole weight behind it pierced deeply into the man’s chest.

Struggling to catch her breath, Chami flashed a satisfied smile.

Kanata had stopped moving. Light vanished from his pupil in his broadly opened eyes—he glared at Chami through his dulling pupils.

“Wha—”

Another dull sound rang out again.

Kanata had thrust his hand into Chami’s torso. The unpleasant sound of flesh being penetrated entered Chiharu’s ears. Stabbed into the abdomen by

the man's arm strongly, red blood spilled out all at once.

“.....*Puu—*”

Blood spewed out from Chami's mouth. *Kanata* sent a kick towards Chami, sending her petite body flying through the air effortlessly. Her body hit the ground and rolled all the way till Chiharu's side. Her fallen off spectacle was sent sliding past Chiharu to behind her.

“Ch—”

Chiharu rushed towards Chami's side.

“Chami-chan! Chami-chan!”

Chiharu lifted up Chami who was collapsed face up on the floor. Chami's face distorted from intense pain for an instance. But, she immediately showed a frail smile, and spoke weakly.

“He..... really..... became..... a monster..... S-serves me right..... to get killed because of my own ability..... Kuhahaa.....”

Kanata and the gigantic centipede drew near to Chami who was laughing self-mockingly.

Looking at him, Chiharu did not know if the man was even human anymore. The spanner was still driven into the man's chest even now as he continued to groan. It was unmistakably a fatal injury.

“Ah-ah..... so I'm going to meet my end here..... I guess this is it for a third-rate small-time villain after all.....”

Chami coughed up blood as she frowned at Chiharu.

“What are you doing..... quickly get out of here..... didn't I tell you that this fight has nothing to do with you.....”

“.....!”

Chiharu couldn't produce any words and only shook her head frantically.

It was not unrelated to her. She had that sort of feeling.

“Just get away..... If you don't leave quickly, this place will soon.....”

Chiharu shook her head and tried to drag Chami's body along with her. She desperately tried to put some distance between them and *Kanata* and his Mushi, but could not do much with her arm strength. The floor was smudged with blood through the places over which Chami was dragged.

"You idiot..... I have yet to lose..... I will..... drag him down along with me over here, so....."

Chami spouted urgently.

"It doesn't have nothing to do with me..... Didn't I say before! That we are friends.....!"

Chiharu was unable to recall the foremost reason, but for now, she cried out the reason that came to her mind.

It wasn't a lie.

Chiharu did not dislike the Chami that had a tall pride and spoke as if people other than herself were objects that belonged her. Chami mentioned herself that she was nothing but an accessory, but at that moment when she shouted out proudly about her desires honestly, she looked especially queenly.

Chami turned angry.

"Don't be such an idiot.....! Don't throw away your life for such a meaningless reason.....! How far are you going to go..... to act like the main character.....!"



“GRRAAa!”

It was not the scream of a human. At the same time as when the man raised a roar, the blue centipede rushed at Chiharu and Chami.

“.....!”

Chiharu resigned herself to her death.

However, right before the centipede chomp down on the stiffened Chiharu and Chami, its movements stopped abruptly.

“GRR..... RuAAa.....”

Kanata’s behaviour was weird. He seemed as if he was being mindful of something, looking around left and right at the surroundings.

“.....?”

Before Chiharu and Chami who looked at him dazedly, the man’s action became increasingly unusual. He looked agitatedly over every single corner of the floor with his bloodshot eyes.

“You’re..... still going to get in my way.....!”

The man started to shout out unfathomable words.

“You should have already been killed by me! That time, in this tower.....! You’re still going to get in my way, you damn cat!”

“.....!”

Chami was the only one who gasped.

Chiharu still did not understand the situation, and followed the man’s line of sight. But, the figure of said cat was nowhere to be seen.

“Something like that..... to you who has gone mad..... is obviously just your hallucination.....”

Chami laughed peculiarly. However, tears formed on the corner of her eyes.

“Or could it be..... Damn it.....! Are you trying to say that even though you’ve died, you still want me and Chiharu to live..... don’t kid me..... Owl!”

Chami shouted hoarsely.

Chiharu could not understand the meaning behind her words.

“How dare you just go ahead and die by yourself! Didn’t I order you to trudge with me along this shitty life! And yet, you went and died with a smile! The me who you swore loyalty to is just a cowardly and dirty and weak accessory! Even so, you want this kind of shitty me to go on living? You want me to continue down this shitty life, *Owl!*”

Chami was truly lamenting. The girl who had taken the world as her enemy and still flashed an undefeatable smile was currently wailing. She cried out miserably, spluttering out saliva which was mixed with blood and laying her weakness to bare.

Pushii—.

They heard the sound of air being expelled.

Cool water droplets formed on the cheeks of the ash-ridden Chiharu.

Right after, a bright white light flashed in front of her eyes. The bright light gouged a large hole in the blue centipede, scooping out a straight line through the floor. *Kanata* threw his head backwards in surprise.

“Haah..... Haah.....”

A lone youth stood behind Chiharu and Chami. The headband wrapped around his head laid in tatters and his whole body was covered in blood. One could tell with one look that his limply hanging right arm was fractured.

“You.....!”

It was somebody Chiharu knew.

Indeed, she had seen the youth’s face for an instant before when he was fighting against the centipede at the lower floors. At that time, she had been preoccupied with thoughts about Mushi and had forgotten his face till now.

“.....Yo.”

The youth looked at Chiharu with an exhausted expression and blood flowing from his head.

He was the youth she met in front of Nishito City station, the one who was

together with the girl known as Anmoto Shiika who lent her some cash.

“Tch..... why’re you only appearing now.....! You this useless.....!”

With traces of tear streaks remaining on her face, Chami spat out spitefully with difficulty.

“I see, so what happened in this tower was the work of you guys, eh. As expected, we were being made use of conveniently, huh.....”

“Enough about that..... hurry and get your ass up chop-chop! This place is soon going to—”

“Yeah, it’s probably a good idea to make haste. Was it also part of your scheme to stop that guy here..... seems not, you probably intended for us to fight at a lower floor and seal off our escape route, right?”

Chiharu had no inkling about what was Chami and the youth talking about at all.

“Aijisupa-san.....!”

A voice came from beyond the centipede that was writhing in agony.

“Shiika-chan.....?”

Looking at the astonished Chiharu, Shiika too appeared surprised. She stood there as if frozen.

“Ah.....!”

Chami started to get worked up from within Chiharu’s arms all of a sudden. She tried to crawl her way towards Shiika.

“D-damn it.....! You’re mine.....! You were supposed to end up in my palm.....!”

“.....So that’s it. You guys are the enemy as well.”

“Eh.....?”

“GRrAAaAa!”

The youth raised his left hand in the direction of the howling *Kanata*.

Right after they heard the sound of air being ejected, a white flash struck

Kanata and the centipede. Taking opportunity of the moment when the man flinched, the youth rushed by Shiika's side.

"Let's go. Hurry up."

"W-what about them.....?"

"They're the enemy."

Pulling Shiika along by her arm, the youth ran. They ran towards the staircase further in.

"Shit! Stop right there.....!"

Chami stretched out her hand, but there was no way she could reach Shiika. Her face twisted and she screamed out in rage as if she wanted to curse the whole world.

"You're kidding me..... Don't you dare kid me! *Fuyuhotaru*! You probably don't even regard me in your eyes, right! But, remember this! I will definitely get you into my hands without fail! I'll make use of you all for my sake! I'll reach the 'heart' of the Mushitsuki before anyone else! No matter who it is! Every single one of you are going to prostrate before me, Konomura Chami!"

No longer caring about appearances, Chami declared her anger and ambition.

Yesterday, when Chiharu spoke with Chami in front of the station, she had just thought that she was a cool girl unbefitting of her age. However, looking at her current appearance, she finally comprehended the true character of Konomura Chami. Beneath her fearless smiling expression, an ambition incongruous with her small size constantly swirled.

It was relentless and deceitful, but more than anything, it was sheer ambition. That was what Konomura Chami held.

"C-Chami-chan.....!"

Her voice dying down, Chami ran out of strength. She sank onto the ground limply without moving.

"Damn it, damn it.....! Damn it all to hell.....!"

"W-we need to escape immediately.....!"

Chiharu lifted Chami up by her arm and placed her on her back.

She headed for the escalator with Chami's legs dragging behind. Wisps of flames could already be seen licking up from below. The hot air blew Chiharu's hair upwards.

Chiharu did not know what exactly, but her intuition told her something dangerous approached.

"GRrAAaa!"

Kanata turned his gaze in their direction.

"It's fine already..... just let me down already.....! I-it's too late at this rate.....!"

Arms of fire reached out from below, swallowing the area from behind where *Kanata* and the centipede were at.

Chiharu quickly climbed up the escalator; she was just a few steps away from the next floor.

"R-run, quickly.....!"

Chami raised her voice anxiously.

Chiharu saw a small spark from within the sea of flames.

".....!"

Reflexively, she threw Chami onto the floor above.

Then, the next instance.

Explosions rocked the restaurant floor.

Left on the escalator, Chiharu was thrown off by the explosion that blasted out from below.

"....."

All sound disappeared and she lost sensation of her body.

Ah-ah, so you recalled it—.

She seemed to hear somebody's voice.

In her head, something clicked into place.

Visions of the past were brought back to her.

—Why..... why is it that I must forget about it no matter what!

A young Chiharu yelled. There was nobody in her surroundings at all, but her dialogue partner was right by her side.

The location changed and Chiharu was smiling. Under the evening skies dyed red, Chiharu was walking next to a young man.

—This sky..... and even your face? I must lose it all.....?

Even as there was a smile on her face, she was crying in her heart.

—Then..... who am I going to become?

It happened while Chiharu was still young, when she was still a primary school student.

From that day onwards, Chiharu became “Ayukawa Chiharu”.

Before then, Chiharu had a different surname.

Engulfed in the shockwave, Chiharu spoke to her beloved person.

I finally remembered.....

Tears fell from her eyes.

Slammed into the wall, she looked at the burning Urban Dome beyond the cracked window.

She felt as if she could see the green paradise being cooked into charcoal in the blazing dome in slow-motion.

—No, that’s wrong.

The thing that burnt into nothingness were the carefree days that Chiharu spent with overflowing happiness.

The paradise in which she lived her ordinary days having forgotten her sin as well as what was important crumbled.

Chiharu recalled everything.

I..... **The me who was Aria Vareï** had done some very cruel things to you.....

No, that's wrong. This must have been what you thought—.

Once more, the somebody whispered.

That the thing that was truly cruel, was how you completely forgot about him
—.

4.08 The Others

The shockwave propagated upwards from below.

“Tch.....!”

Reiji clicked his tongue and released the compressed water vapours in his left hand.

“Kyaah—”

The squall bisected the flames, causing it to go by Reiji and Shiika’s side and hit the above floor.

There was only one impact from the explosion. After it passed, only small patches of fire were left and the surroundings quietened down. Black smoke accumulated around the ceiling, but there was probably time before it went down to Reiji and Shiika’s height.

Shiika looked down at the floors below with a troubled expression. Looking at the girl worrying apprehensively, Reiji thought serenely that she was someone who couldn’t keep her calm.

“J-just what was that.....?”

“It’s the same as what caused the explosion in the underground parking lot. There were probably lots of gas pipes on that floor seeing as it had lots restaurants. Perhaps it was propane. The fire from below just lit it up, that’s all.”

“W-what should we do.....? There’s nowhere to escape.....”

“After the explosions have passed, we can just use my power to deal with the fire afterwards. That way, we can just turn back and descend from here. But..... sorry, I feel a bit.....”

Reiji collapsed onto one knee on the staircase landing. Blood mixed with sweat streamed down from his forehead onto the ground.

“Aijisupa-san.....!”

He had long passed the limits of his body and spirit.

This had been the first time he used his ability till this extent, in addition to fighting an opponent as monstrous as that masked man. He had also never bore an injury as serious as such. Despite him experiencing all these for the first time, those were all under extreme circumstances.

“Let me just rest..... for a while..... If I don’t recover some stamina, I don’t think I can even make one floor—”

Shiika caught Reiji’s shoulders as he was about to crumple onto the ground.

“E-erm.....”

The weary Reiji didn’t even have the energy to resist the weak Shiika. Unable to do anything, Shiika placed his head on her laps having sat down.

“.....”

Lying in that position on the girl’s lap pillow, Reiji caught his breath. Shiika herself seemed to be bashful, her cheeks flushing red as she took out a handkerchief and wiped at Reiji’s face.

“Erm..... thank you very much, *Aijisupa-san*. For coming to save me.....”

“.....”

“Are you..... alright?”

“Yea.”

Breathing heavily, Reiji nodded frankly. In reality, Shiika’s lap pillow felt pretty comfortable. It was not say the first time that he had been in contact with a member of the opposite sex, but the body temperature that he felt currently was warmer than anything he had experienced. It seems that he would be able to recover faster than he thought. He shut his eyes and focused on recovering.

“E-erm..... would you please listen to me?”

“.....”

“I’ve gotten something that I want to do.No, it’s something that I must do no matter what.”

“.....”

“B-but, I myself do not know what should I do..... that’s why, erm.....”

“.....Fine. I’ll listen to anything.”

Reiji bared a smile.

—Fine. I’ll listen to anything.

That time, he had said that without putting much thoughts into it.

Of course, he was not lying when he said that, that was truly what Reiji had hoped for.

He thought that he wanted to do everything that was in his power for the sake of the only friend he had.

However, Rina’s request had far exceeded Reiji’s wildest expectations.

He finally realised that now.

“Eh?”

“I’ll listen to anything..... I would do anything that is within my ability.”

—Someday, I’ll make such a huge request of you that you would definitely regret it. And that will be something that would shake up your entire life.

Recollecting Rina’s words, he raised a smile.

Good grief, Rina..... your request is truly outrageous. Did you already know that I would do anything for the sake of this girl? The things we do not have..... apart from having strength, this girl carried her ‘weakness’ as well. Did you already know that her life would be entrusted to me—.

“I-is this really fine?”

“Yea.”

“You will..... lend me a helping hand?”

“Yea.”

“.....”

“.....”

“E-erm.....”

“I don’t know if Mushibane would help you out, but if it comes to the worst, the two of us can do it by ourselves..... I’ll forever remain by your side.”

He opened his eyes and looked up at Shiika. Her cheeks were a rosy red. — That sounded just like a proposal, even Reiji thought so in his mind.

“I’m also pretty interested in you myself.....”

“Eh?Eh?”

“Just say anything..... As long as it’s something within my reach, I will.....”

Right before he entrusted himself to the sleeping bug, he gazed at Shiika’s flustered and unsure face.

Reiji closed his eyes.

“.....I feel that Rina and *Aijisupa-san* are very alike.”

Shiika’s soft and tender voice felt soothing to his ears.

“The two of you are so strong..... that’s why I think that the two of you surely couldn’t ask for help even when you wanted to. Because you felt that if you had received help, you would have become reliant..... that you would lose your strength.....”

Reiji revealed a faint smile.

That’s just so. That’s why, the two of us—.

He continued to listen to Shiika till his consciousness was ferried to dreamland.

4.09 Chami The Last

Feeling her body jolt rhythmically, Chami's consciousness returned.

Her cheeks were in contact with something warm and comfy.

"Heave-ho, heave-ho....."

She could hear the sound of someone breathing heavily right by her face.

Awakening from her slumber, Chami felt a sharp pain as she became fully awake.

"Ouch.....!"

"Woah."

Chami threw her head back in pain, nearly caused Chiharu to fall over backwards.

"Wha-.....! Eh.....? What's.....?"

With tears forming in her eyes due to the pain, Chami grasped ahold of the situation she was in.

Chiharu was currently climbing up the escalator with Chami on her back. It seems like they had gone quite a distance up, as the smoke was no longer that thick. She also did not feel the heat she felt back at the restaurants.

As renovation had not even started, there were few flammable materials around. It should have been possible for Chiharu to escape the advancing fire even as she carried Chami.

"H-hey, don't struggle too much, Chami-chan. This is actually pretty tiring despite how it looks."

Seeing Chiharu's admonishing look as she turned around, Chami was taken aback.

"W-what's with that face! It's completely black!"

"I can't help it. That's because I was engulfed by the explosion a wee bit."

More importantly, don't struggle anymore, okay."

As Chami looked more closely, she realised that Chiharu's clothes had been shredded to rags. There were also areas which were smudged with blood, and there was a slight limp on her feet. Even then, she had slowly step-by-step climbed up the stationary escalator.

"I just went upwards somehow or another, but was that alright? I tried shaking you multiple times, but you wouldn't budge at all, Chami-chan."

"Well, this is fine, but..... why did you bring me along..... Ouch!"

"Wawawaa!"

Chami's face twisted in pain and she clutched her stomach. Chiharu had wrapped her jacket around her stomach probably to stop the bleeding. It was fairly effective seeing as how blood had stopped flowing from her wound. However, as long as there was a hole in her stomach, she was not supposed to be moving. Even though she was being carried by Chiharu, that did not stop the pain.

"Didn't I say not to struggle, jeez!"

Chiharu said angrily, with sweating pouring down her face. She must have carried Chami all the way up here, using up most of her stamina.

"Kuu....."

As even speaking hurt terribly, she kept quiet.

Moving only her head and looking down at the floors below, she only saw the wispy flames and smoke and did not spot any human figure at all.

It would seem like she was successful in defeating *Kanata*. In her original plan, the headbanded youth would have had a more prolonged fight against *Kanata*, and she would have detonated the restaurant floor the same way as she did the underground parking lot. That would have left *Fuyuhotaru* who had escaped earlier in the upper floor alone, and cut off the two's escape route.

"Good grief....."

On Chiharu's back, Chami sighed.

Before long, the two of them reached a viewing platform surrounded by glass on all four sides. Outside the cube-shaped wall of the escalator landing, the floor was choked full of smoke that rose from below, painting the whole floor a pitch black.

In the middle of the escalator landing, a short escalator continued upwards. After ascending that, Chami and Chiharu reached the rooftop.

Same as when she had visited a few days earlier, traces of battle between *Kanata* and *Owl* remained.

The cold night air mixed with the hot air rising from below, causing an updraft which blew Chami and Chiharu's hair upwards. Looking up, the stars could still be seen faintly in the sky blotted with smoke. The surroundings were punctuated with shrill sirens.

"Aah, that's my limit! I'm bushed! I can't move a single inch anymore!"

Putting down Chami leaning against the fence, Chiharu got down and sat next to her.

Chami spontaneously spouted out.

"Well, that was pretty well done, for you."

".....Chami-chan really is awfully self-important."

"If you're not happy with that, you could just drop me down from here. If it's now, there's no one looking."

Laughing through her nose, Chami suddenly widened her eyes.

"Hm? What is it?"

Noticing that her complexion changed all of a sudden, Chiharu followed her gaze.

"!"

A lone figure rose up from the escalator which they came from.

It was *Kanata*.

His whole body was dyed red with blood and covered in burns, yet he was still alive and kicking. Bloodshot eyes looked towards their direction through the

now useless goggles and he gradually drew towards them.

“T-that monster.....! He still wants to fight!”

Chami who tried to get up was held back by Chiharu.

Chiharu gave a smile.

“And up.”

Getting up with an utter, she approached *Kanata* carelessly, causing Chami to panic.

“Y-you idiot.....! Don’t get close to him!”

“This person can no longer fight.”

Chiharu stood in front of the man with a grin.

Chami looked at *Kanata* with a start.

The figure of the two-headed centipede was no longer by his side. —In all probability, it had probably shielded its owner, *Kanata*, from the explosion. And now, it was gone.

“Then, he is—”

“Yep, a Fallen.....”

Chiharu smiled sorrowfully. —Why did Chiharu know of the term Fallen. Before Chami could ask that, Chiharu spoke to *Kanata* kindly.

“You no longer have to fight any longer.”

“.....”

The vacant pupils of the man stared at Chiharu.

Chiharu gently touched the man’s cheeks.

“It would be great if the battles have ended the next time you open your eye.....”

The smiling Chiharu wiped off the tears that had flowed from his eyes. The man who should have lost his emotions after his Mushi died was crying.

A red smoke emerged from his back. It was Chami’s Mushi which only she

could see—the red queen bee melted into the darkness of the night.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, *Kanata* fell over. He fell on the floor with a thud, not a single muscle moving. But, seeing his chest move up and down, it seems like he would miraculously live on.

“You.....?”

Chami looked up, and saw Chiharu wiping at her own cheeks with her finger. She seemed to have cried herself, but once she turned around, there was only a carefree smile on her face.

“Really, that was troubling.”

“.....”

“Now then, Chami-chan. Didn’t you say there was an escape route? How are we going to get help from here?”

Chami languidly pointed her finger at the sky.

“.....? The sky? Ah, I can see the moon, it’s a full moon tonight.”

“This morning’s news predicted that there was a 60 percent chance of rain.”

“Is that so. I guess that was off the mark then. I can’t see clearly because of the smoke, but there doesn’t seem to be a single cloud in the sky.”

“.....”

“.....Eh? Don’t tell me, Chami-chan, you.....”

Chami gazed up at the sky vacantly.

“If it rains, the fire will be put out..... don’t tell me that was the situation that you thought of? Isn’t Chami-chan very ingenious?”

Chiharu moved closer to Chami and put her hands on the floor and looked into her face. Ignoring Chiharu’s spasming face, Chami continued to gaze up at the skies filled with smoke.

—In the first place, Chami didn’t held any expectations for the rain. It’s just that, if she tried to face the other strong Mushitsuki like *Kanata* on a half-baked battlefield with an escape route, she thought that she would never win.

No matter what shapes they were in, even if it was based on pure luck, those who remained were the winners. Chami felt that this was fit and easy to understand.

Chami had remained standing.

However, did what Chami accomplished made her the winner? If she had burnt to death just like that, could she die with a smile on her face just as *Owl* did?

“Don’t come here—didn’t I order that of you? Because your combat potential is practically non-existent, *Konoha*.”

Stopping Chiharu from getting closer with one hand, Chami spoke softly.

“.....?”

Chiharu, whose face was being pushed away by Chami’s hand, knitted her eyebrows.

“.....Once the firefighters below extinguish the fire, my Mushi that is clinging onto the wall would lower you down one-by-one”

A whispery voice sounded out from next to Chami.

A space that had been empty till now slowly turned into a shade of green. — The figure of an outlandish-looking Mushi that was able to camouflage by changing the refractive index of its scales showed itself. Sandwiched between the two wings which resembled leaves, *Konoha* appeared from within wearing a white coat and goggles.

“W-who is it?”

Disregarding the bowled over Chiharu, Chami looked up at *Konoha* with a cynical smile.

“If you just dropped me down from here, wouldn’t you be able to kill me? Don’t you hate me?”

“.....”

“.....So? You properly ‘saw’ it, right?”

“Yes..... that *Fuyuhotaru* came into contact with Horisaki Azusa..... and also

their dialogue.....”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll praise you for this much.”

“.....You will bring me along, wouldn’t you? Bring us to the ‘heart’ of the Mushitsuki.....”

Her voice was so soft one could barely make out her words, but her tone was unmistakable.

Chami looked up at *Konoha* in disbelief, but immediately unveiled a smile.

“Be it *Owl*, or be it you..... All my pawns are such brazen brats. All going off on their own and making unreasonable request of me.....”

Chami lowered her head and sighed.

—How about we trudge onwards together along this shitty life!

Looks like the ambition that started from that time had yet to come to an end.

If this was a story, it would probably be one that was filthy, cowardly, not even third-rate and does not even have a single bit of glory in it.

However, the main character of this story was unquestionably Konomura Chami. Someday, she would definitely triumph over everyone and sneer at them all from above.

“So be it, I’ll do it..... Your life, your destiny, I’ll use them all! I’ll drag down all those in the lead role from the stage and place myself there! I’ll lead you all down my this shitty life!”

Next to Chami who reveal her ambition, Chiharu smiled once more. In contrast to Chami, even though her face was dirtied with soot, that sunny smile seemed to beam out from within.

“Hey, let me join in too.”

“.....Haa? Don’t say such stupid things. This isn’t some kid’s adventure. In the first place, this has nothing to do with you, Ayukawa Chiharu—”

“It’s not Ayukawa Chiharu.”

“.....?”

“I’ve just remembered a bit. Ah, even though I say that I remembered it, I’m only referring to my own memories, I still haven’t recalled Aria Vareï’s memory. But, it seems that I would recall those before long. Like, it doesn’t have to be Aria Vareï itself, but if I touch something that has its scent, I feel like I would remember it all.....”

Chami and *Konoha* faced each other in puzzlement.

However, Chiharu looked like their reaction doesn’t faze her and grinned.

“My name is actually, Kusuriya Chiharu. Once again, nice to meet you, Konomura Chami-chan and..... *Konoha-chan*, was it?”

“Kusuriya.....?”

“By the way, Chami-chan. This is kinda sudden, but would you hear me out? Do you know of any child called Kusuriya Daisuke? He’s my cute younger brother.”

“If you’re speaking about Kusuriya Daisuke, of course..... Eh? Kusuriya? Younger brother?”

The confused Chami and the grinning Chiharu in good mood. Along with them was *Konoha* who was mystified as she failed to comprehend the situation.

Above them, the smoke in the skies cleared up, revealing the round and shiny moon.

A Refrain

Horisaki Azusa walked in the direction of Nishito City station.

The surroundings were in an uproar.

The gigantic tower that stood behind Azusa's back was lit a crimson red as it burned. It wasn't just the tower, the dome next to it was spewing out huge flames as well.

In the flow of things with firefighting vehicles and news vehicles, as well as the people scrambling for a view, Azusa alone was headed in the opposite direction.

There were a few who turned around to look at the barefooted Azusa dressed only in a thin piece of cloth. —The ability to erase her presence had already disappeared from Azusa's body.

“.....”

She narrowly latched onto her dimming consciousness and continued walking.

She had seen everything.

All that had arisen in Nishito City. Including what occurred in 'URBAN', everything.

However, her will had been taken over by Dioresutoi, and she couldn't exert her identity. After it had been done with its business, it quickly vanished from within Azusa. What was left in her was but a miniscule bit of 'strength' that took her all just to walk.

Her long hair was messy and her face was covered with soot. If she was seen by the person she loved right now, what would he have said?

—How about you wipe your face at least?

Recalling the faint smile of the young man, a smile came to her lips.

A single cicada was resting on her shoulder. However, its form was indistinct and it seemed to be disappearing even now. —In the end, the time bestowed

upon Azusa was merely a transient one, unlike that of Anmoto Shiika.

Azusa could feel that the strength which remained in her belonged to a 'king'-like existence different from Anmoto Shiika. That was what she had felt for a long time, but the one who had hijacked her consciousness had no interest in. That was because it knew that that person would never obey anybody.

Different from Anmoto Shiika, the other king was presently coming down this street. Azusa's feeble footsteps were headed towards that person.

—And then, she reached him.

Azusa bumped into somebody with a *don*.

“Ah.....?”

The one whom Azusa bumped into, was a youth of the same generation as her.

He had probably just exited from the station, seeing as he carried a large baggage in hand. His appearance was very ordinary, the only distinguishing feature being the plaster on his cheek.

Azusa lifted her head sluggishly.

“.....I see you still have that same gloomy face as always, *Kakkou-kun*..... This is the worst, for you to be the last person I meet.”

“You..... *Minmin*.....!”

The youth who grasped Azusa's slender shoulder was astonished. Looking at his stumped look, Azusa chuckled. Seeing the disconcerted appearance of Kusuriya Daisuke was an extremely rare occurrence.

“Just kidding~. It seems that *Kakkou-kun* have the right to be king too..... that's why, I could make it all the way here. I doubt I'll be able to hold on all the way till Ouka City though.....”

“*Minmin*..... why are you here..... also, how did you—”

“Be careful, *Kakkou-kun*..... Central Headquarters is hiding one of the *Original Three*.....”

“.....!”

“Aah..... I want to meet you once more..... Keigo-san.....”

Her consciousness was already fading away.

The cicada that stood on her shoulder became blurry.

In Daisuke's arms, Azusa's heart started to lose its form. She couldn't even recall her tiny one and only dream, nor the face of her beloved person.

“Even though I still have things I want to say to Keigo-san.....”

“*Minmin*.....?”

“No matter what happens, no matter how you treat me..... I will always..... love you.....”

The light in her eyes rapidly faded.

“*Minmin*.....! Oi, *Minmin*!”

The cicada on her shoulder completely disappeared.

Within Daisuke's arms, Azusa was unable to recall anything anymore.

Behind Azusa who lost everything once again, the gigantic tower continued to smoulder.

Afterword

Hello, this is Iwai Kyouhei.

This series, “Mushi Uta”, has somehow embarked onto its fourth volume.

It was all thanks to the readers, you guys’ support, that it was able to continue on so far.

Thank you very much.

I will continue to put in my very best effort from now and onwards.

Regarding this work, I would like to add a trivial supplement.

I would be glad if you could read through this volume while feeling as though it was a making of a DVD movie.

Regarding the main characters and supporting characters.

I think that no matter whoever, everybody had wanted to stand in the centre of the stage with everyone’s admiration.

Being unable to become a regular for your club activities, or letting slip the chance of receiving some award, or things did not go the way you expected and you fail. Everyone probably had those time where they were unable to help it, and could only support the main character and resign themselves to be a supporting character.

However, even as the main character basks in the spotlight, there would also be those who would polish their fangs and wait vigilantly for a chance to snatch the position of the main character from behind.

And then, when those people finally become the main character,

—Ha, look at me now! It is I that is the true protagonist! Everyone, look at me!

Those who are able to proudly declare as such are, in my opinion, those who would truly shine as the main character. Aren't those "supporting characters who never say die" the ones who would go on to be the next protagonist.

About duty.

To live life healthily and happily is what I feel is the duty of everyone. Anybody who had been brought into this world by their parents should have the rights to live a happy life.

On the other hand, there are those who decide on their own duty.

I want to do that, or that is something I must do no matter what—they carry their chest proudly proclaiming that those aims or objectives are the reason for which they live.

Whether it is the duty bestowed upon one, or one chosen by oneself.

I thought that it would be interesting to depict which takes precedence, or which would triumph over the other.

Concerning the organisation of the structure.

This time, I experimented with some slightly different styles.

The prologue is sooo lengthy! There were probably many who thought so. In fact, it wasn't just long, I tried to include plenty of twists in it too, but..... here I'm praying that they work.

Apart from that, I tried to modify the points of view a little bit in many places.

I plan to continue with these slight changes in impression in my following works.

In writing this work, as usual, I owe great thanks to much people from many different areas.

To the ones who were in charge of supervising my work, Onai-san and Yamaguchi-san, moreover, to Ruroo-san who handled the illustrations. When I received the schedule that there was only one month left from submitting the

manuscript till printing, instead of the manuscript, I considered writing a runaway note, but..... that I manage to make it somehow or the other, that is surely due to the support of everyone.

I truly thank you.

I have a feeling that this would continue to be the case from now onwards.

I digress a bit, but in the October issue of “The Sneaker” in which the bug series is serialised, I’ve put together a special feature for Mushi Uta. In the feature, there is an essay about my plans titled: ‘A letter to the future me who is one step away from finishing the manuscript for the final volume of Mushi Uta’.

Ever since the magazine got on sale, I’ve received queries saying, ‘Is Mushi Uta ending in the fourth volume?’, but..... that was merely the plans of a virtual ‘future’ me. I apologise, that was just the selfish thought of the author who wondered, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if Mushi Uta could continue on just a bit longer’ (lol).

In the same October issue of “The Sneaker”, an extra edition of my other debut series, “Challenger of Killing Time”, is written too.

I am eagerly in the midst of writing its third volume as well.

Same as up till now, I plan on continuing with a different style than that for Mushi Uta.

All in all, I’ll put in my best so that you can enjoy yourself as much as possible.

October 2004

Iwai Kyouhei

Credits

Mushi Uta - Volume 04. The Paradise Where Dreams Burn

Author: Iwai Kyohei.

Illustrator: Ruroo.

Translations: [C.E. Light Novel Translation](#) (prologue and chapter 1), [Baka-Tsuki](#) (the rest).

Ebook: dreamer2908.

Contents were fetched from the translation group's site on 2017.12.06.